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**THE MUSLIM PRESENCE AND REPRESENTATIONS
OF ISLAM AMONG THE MERU OF KENYA**

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Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

**KING'S COLLEGE LONDON
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON**

January, 1995



ABSTRACT

The thesis analyzes the Muslim presence and representations of Islam among the Meru people of Kenya in the 20th century. The circumstances leading to the establishment of pioneer Muslim communities by the 'Swahili', the Nubians and the Mahaji, in Meru are examined. The rejection or acceptance of Islam by the people of Meru is linked to theories of conversion. The main emphasis is on the local manifestations of Islam. Case material from Meru town and the neighbouring areas is cited.

Local representations of Islam and Muslim identity are analyzed in relation to the oppositional dyad of *Dini/Ushenzi*. The thesis argues that the opposition of *Dini* to *Ushenzi* has continuously impinged upon the local manifestation of Islam in Meru. Examples of how this stereotyped notion is transposed from its coastal cultural milieu and applied in a 'fossilized' form by Muslims in Meru are given.

The shift in the early 1960s from the previous emphasis on distinctions between the three Muslim groups, to the need for a common Muslim community identity, is linked to the post-independence social-economic crisis that threatened the presence of Islam in Meru. The mechanics of the construction and consolidation of an urban Muslim community identity are examined. The analysis of the internal dynamics of the emergent urban Muslim community focuses on the notion of the propriety of religious practice and behaviour.

An examination of the influence of *Tabligh* during the last decade, (1980-1990) reveals an increase in the Muslim activities in Meru. Throughout the 1980s Islam spread slowly, almost unobtrusively, in the rural areas in the northern part of Meru. The analysis of the forces underpinning this process; and the resultant dilemma of conflicting identities of individual converts living in the rural areas, is placed within the local social context.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank all those who have made this study possible. My greatest debt of gratitude goes to the King's College Theological Trust for awarding me a scholarship which made this study possible. I am also indebted to the World Council of Churches for a grant during the first year of the study. I was also fortunate to receive a grant from the Spalding Trust during the last year of the study, for which I am grateful to the Trustees. I am grateful to Kenyatta University for granting me study-leave throughout the period of the study.

I should like to thank Dr. Peter B. Clarke of King's College for supervising the thesis. I express my profound gratitude to Dr. Humphrey Fisher of School of Oriental and African Studies for his help, kindness and support. I am very grateful to Dr. Louis Brenner of School of Oriental and African Studies not only for encouraging me to formulate my ideas during the initial stages of the study, but also for reading the drafts of the thesis and giving useful advice. I am also grateful to Dr. Vanessa L. Davies of King's College Language Centre for proof-reading the final draft of the thesis.

My husband, James Kubai and our daughter, Kagendo, bore my absence from home ungrudgingly, even when they had to spend many months in Kenya without the care and comfort of a wife and a mother. Their love and understanding was a continual source of strength and inspiration.

I am grateful to the people I met during my fieldwork in Meru in 1991 and 1992, in particular, Al-Hajji Mucheke, Sheikh Abdi, Rehman and Maua. I am also grateful to my parents Tabitha and Samweri Maingi for their moral and financial support during the fieldwork. Mary Mwiandi of History Department, University of Nairobi assisted me with the fieldwork in Chuka and the Kenya National Archives. I would be unable to acknowledge individually all those who facilitated access to materials and gave their time and advice. My indebtedness to them is both sincere and profound.

INTRODUCTION

Islam, as embodied in the Quran, the *Sunnah*, that is the deeds and sayings of the Prophet as represented in the *Hadith* and actualized through the *Sharia*, is canonical. But over the centuries, Islam has become part of the culture of many different peoples, with the result that representation and "manifestation of the Muslim content of each culture is a function of a process of Islamization".¹ These various manifestations of Islam range from the clerical traditions in West Africa, the Islamization and 'Somalization' in the Horn of Africa, to Swahilization in East Africa. And even within this broad regional demarcation, there are peculiar micro-regional or ethnic representations of the one and universal Islam, patterned on the historical and cultural contingencies of a given society in time and space.

The various aspects of the conversion of African peoples to both Islam and Christianity have received reasonably adequate attention and now long bibliographies on anthropological, sociological, historical, theological, psychological, and even psychoanalytical perspectives of conversion are available. A survey of these studies indicates that the social institutions and the social structures are crucial to the adoption of Islam by an African community, though these factors alone do not account for the acceptance of Islam by one community and its rejection by another. Therefore broad generalizations cannot fully account for the varied modes of the diffusion of Islam in Africa and the function of such studies as the extended debate² between Robin Horton and Humphrey Fisher, as the latter suggests, is "to propose general principles, leaving it to the regional and other experts to

¹ R. L. Bunger, 1975:2.

² R. Horton, 1971, 1975 and H. Fisher, 1971, 1974, 1985.

decide whether the principles fit the circumstances of this or that particular case."³

Lewis observes that once a community has come into contact with Islam either through trade or migration, the diffusion of Islam or lack of it will be contingent upon "other attendant variables... associated with population pressure...tribal expansion; prevailing patterns of economic interests and tribal ethos and values..."⁴ Therefore, it is necessary, he argues, to look at the social-economic changes that affect conversion to Islam, for Islam provides for both the individual and the group, a form of identity where social changes are taking place.

Bunger subscribes to the same view in his study of the Pokomo, in which he identifies three variables in the process of Islamization: the traditional culture of those who convert to Islam; the culture of the group who introduce it; and the precise nature of the contact.⁵ Each society is unique in its contact with Islam and even where the said variables are similar, differences are not lacking. Therefore, each case merits its own study and analysis of the function of these variables at the time of its encounter with Islam, in order to bring out the aspects which shape its reaction and determine the outcome. For instance, it is within Bunger's second variable, that is the culture of those who introduce Islam, that we could locate the cultural traits which the coastal Muslim pioneers brought with them to Meru in the interior of Kenya, far from the coast.

³ H. Fisher, 1985:154.

⁴ I. M. Lewis, 1966:33.

⁵ R. L. Bunger, 1973:2.

According to Bergman, the coastal societies function through "a sort of coastal meta-cosmology" whose "key oppositional dyads...are *ustaarab/nyika* (Arabness/civilization and town/bush), Muslim/*mshenzi* (pagan or savage), *waungwana/watumwe* (freemen/slaves)".⁶ This coastal meta-cosmology is brought to bear upon the encounter between the Muslim pioneers and the Meru people. The oppositional dyad, to borrow Bergman's terminology, of *Dini* (Islam)/*ushenzi* (paganism or savagery), becomes the most functional element not only of the relationship between the various groups; it is transposed from the coastal cultural milieu and applied in different circumstances in Meru. An analysis of the process of reproducing Swahili culture and identity through the enactment of the struggle between *dini* and *ushenzi*, gives an insight into the formation of the pioneer migrant Muslim communities and the process through which they forged a common Muslim community identity; and the trend since the beginning of the 1980s, of the *Tabligh*-borne conversion devoid of tangible elements of Swahili culture, that is now discernible in some rural areas of Meru district .

Differences between the Muslim groups in Meru and the expression of separate identities is the key question informing my analysis of the representation of Islam in Meru. In this study which focusses on Islam in both rural and urban Meru, it is borne in mind that in reality,

there is not one but many communities of Islam... and many who regard themselves as Muslims are scarcely accepted as such by those that they take to be their co-religionists.⁷

The diversity of Islam is given an interesting analysis by Launay in his study of the Dyula of Cote d'Ivoire, West Africa. It is necessary to state Launay's thesis here before I proceed to examine the representation of Islam in Meru.

⁶ J. Bergman, 1988:3.

⁷ I. M. Lewis, 1966:75.

He starts by identifying the problem of finding

a framework in which to analyze the relationship between this single global entity, Islam, and the multiple entities that are the religious beliefs and practices of Muslims in specific communities and moments in history.⁸

The notion of Islam, he suggests, is defined not so much by consensus among those who identify themselves as Muslims, as by cleavages, social and religious cleavages that mark them off from others. A way around this problem is to "posit the existence of multiple Islams", which on the other hand would be theologically untenable. Disagreement between the various Muslim communities is premised on the existence of single true Islam, but even then each group holds its own practices to be consistent with the one true Islam and that of another, if it is different, to be inconsistent. Thus they define their own reflection of Islam with reference to others. In the case under study, each of the Muslim groups in Meru defined itself with reference and in opposition to others: the Swahili in opposition to the *mahaji* saw themselves as the standard bearers of the faith, and the town Muslims felt that they were better than the rural Muslims. Here, Islam is interpreted within the context of the culture in which it is introduced.

I am arguing that the elements of the coastal Swahili system of inequality that I have identified as 'fossilized' notions of *ushenzi* and *dini/ungwana* shaped the ideas of Islam that were imported into Meru. At the coast, these concepts have now changed since the system of social stratification has also changed. Indeed the use of such terms these days might provoke violence at the coast, but in Meru people still speak of *ushenzi* in everyday contexts. *Dini*, as I will illustrate in this thesis, is continually challenged by *ushenzi*. *Ushenzi*, which can assume a variety of forms, is seen as a potentially destructive threat to *dini*. *Ushenzi* is fluid

⁸ R. Launay, 1992:6.

and difficult to pin down to specific actions: for instance, during the early period it was seen as an act of *ushenzi* for a Muslim to be initiated into the Meru council of elders known as *njuri*, but nowadays if one was a member of *njuri* before conversion to Islam, one can participate in *njuri* activities as long as they observe the distinction between *halal* and *haram* meats during the *njuri* feasts. This is a rationalization which is not supported by any theological argument and opposition to *ushenzi* does not change, only the definition has acquired a certain degree of elasticity that can be altered to suit the various circumstances.

As will be shown in this thesis, for example in Nchulubi's case, *ushenzi* has its own forces but *dini* has more power to counter it. Islam is presented as a powerful force and it is to this force that people resort in search of remedies or protective charms. The decision to consult with a sheikh does not depend on the individual's understanding of Islam, it is not seen as a search in the realm of beliefs and practices and that is why I suggest that it is not 'mixing' on their part.

Defining Conversion

In recent years, Islam in Africa has attracted a great deal of attention from scholars in a wide variety of disciplines, with the result that conversion to Islam in the African context has become, to some extent, a matter of definition. The definition of what actually constitutes conversion may seem, on the surface, rather more clear-cut than it really is. This point will be illustrated below when we examine what conversion to Islam means to an individual Muslim living in rural Meru. Before examining the Meru case in detail, therefore, it is worth noting certain relevant definitions of conversion. In his book on the subject, Nock defined conversion as

the reorientation of the soul of an individual, his deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another, a turning which implies a consciousness that a great change is

involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right. It is seen at its fullest in the positive response of a man to the choice placed before him by the prophetic religions.⁹

To define what he calls adhesion as opposed to conversion, he posits a situation in which different racial and religious groups, as a result of an interactive process over a period and in a given area, are exposed to mutual influence - "blending of strains".¹⁰ The borrowing of various cultural elements that results from such a relationship leads to "fusion". He sees this fusion as not leading

to any definite crossing of religious frontiers, in which an old spiritual home was left for a new one and for all, but to men's having one foot on each side of a fence which was cultural and not creedal. They led to an acceptance of new worships as supplements and not as substitutes, and they did not involve the taking of a new way of life in place of the old. This we may call adhesion in contradistinction to conversion.¹¹

Nock's idea of limiting conversion to prophetic religions which exclusively require total, unqualified commitment by the individual convert, and adhesion to non-prophetic religions, in which there is less commitment and hence no "crossing of religious frontiers", lays itself open to criticism. First, the choice that he posits as openly presented to the potential convert by the requirements of a prophetic religion may not necessarily be as stark as Nock maintains. His supposition holds more for Christianity - the proselytization of Africa by the Christian missionaries, whose religion demanded a reorientation of the convert's soul and a deliberate, complete turning, not "from indifference or from an earlier form of piety"¹² (to

⁹ A. D. Nock, 1933:7.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.6.

¹¹ A. D. Nock, 1933:6-7.

¹² Ibid., p.7.

borrow Nock's terminology) but from an earlier condition of 'paganism', 'heathenism' and 'sin', to a new salvation through Christ - than it does for Islam in Africa. This is not to say that Islam demanded of its converts less commitment than did Christianity; the point is, while the Christian missionaries sought to secure "sufficient control over the minds" of the native through the boarding school system in Meru,¹³ the Muslims were more inclined to be satisfied with the individual convert's acceptance of Islam as sufficient to effect change from a condition of *ushenzi* to *dini*.¹⁴

The second dimension to the definitional complexity arises from the summary dismissal of other religions as non-prophetic. Nock's dichotomy between prophetic and non-prophetic religions, and the different patterns of response that he attributes to each of them, are not borne out by the facts of the spread of Islam in East Africa and many other places.¹⁵ The acclaimed 'domestication' and accommodation of Islam in Africa (though the use of these concepts has its own problem⁵, as will be explained later) seems to me to be an endorsement of Nock's idea of "new worships as useful supplements", even in such a prophetic religion as Islam. His dichotomy runs into difficulties when it is applied to the cases of converts who, as we shall see in Meru for instance, have adopted Islam, and yet have not made any definite changes in their life. This point will be explored further to determine whether this dichotomy holds for the process of religious change that takes place in Meru; but before that, it is useful to present two other types of conversion.

¹³ The use of boarding school system as a vehicle for evangelization in Meru is alluded to in chapter 2, p.116.

¹⁴ This can be supported by Sheikh Ahmed's reference to the category of Muslims that he termed *Inshallah*, he hoped that their children in future would be better Muslims. See chapter 6, p.275.

¹⁵ Levtzion (1979:19) too, observes that the of expansion of Islam in West Africa is largely through the process that Nock defines as adhesion.

Levtzion distinguishes between "communal" and "individual" conversion. In communal or group conversion,

Islam was adopted by ethnic groups in their own milieu, while maintaining their own cultural identity. There was hardly a break with the past traditions and pre-Islamic customs and beliefs survived. In this process more people came under the influence of Islam, but they took longer to cover the distance from the former religion to Islam, viewed as a continuum from nominal acceptance of Islam to greater conformity and commitment.¹⁶

While in the process of individual conversion,

every convert had the personal experience of breaking off from his own society against social and moral pressures. Along this pattern, conversion was a rather slow process, involving individuals and small groups.¹⁷

Levtzion attributes the difference between the spread of Islam in West and East Africa to the distinction between these two forms of conversion. In West Africa, to which he ascribes the communal form, groups maintained their previous cultural identity. In East Africa "where Islam implied swahilization", converts "not only accepted a new religion, but also a new cultural and ethnic identity", as they "left their own tribes and joined the only known Muslim community, that of the Swahili".¹⁸ He suggests that the two patterns of conversion correspond to Nock's adhesion and conversion.

In this parallel between East and West Africa, Levtzion's implication that Swahili is an ethnic identity, and therefore those who become Muslim

¹⁶ N. Levtzion, 1979:19.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.19.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.19.

acquire a new ethnic identity, calls for a rejoinder. Swahilization in East Africa is a complex phenomenon. Even on the coast where it is believed that the Swahili proper are found, many of the groups that are labeled 'Swahili' by others do not call themselves Swahili. They identify themselves by their own 'tribal' or town names, and not by the "generic term 'Swahili'" which, according to Salim, has been imposed on them first by Arabs and later European colonialists; an identity which some of them have accepted in addition to their own 'tribal' names but not in place of them.¹⁹ Salim states categorically that "Swahili... is not a tribe but a generic or umbrella term covering a wide spectrum of identifiable groups that are not linked by any common descent or lineage..."²⁰

It is true to say that Islamization implied Swahilization (until very recently as we will see in Meru), but in view of the varying definitions of the Swahili, and the diversity of groups included, Levtzion's claim that Swahilization in East Africa conferred upon the Muslim converts a new ethnic identity is only partly true. On the one hand, the available data on the process of Swahilization of various peoples, support this claim, for instance those Wanyamwezi, Manyema and others that I will refer to in this study as constituting the Swahili had been Swahilized and Islamized and as Hobley notes, "had lost all connection with their particular tribe".²¹ On the other hand, not all Muslim converts acquired a new ethnic identity after conversion, for instance the converts in Meru were labelled 'Swahili' by their non-Muslim relatives and '*mahaji*' by the Swahili. But they themselves were well aware of the fact that they could not be Swahili, they were Meru converts to Islam and we can even say that the term *mahaji* was ascribed to this group since they had actually been converted. Indeed they resented the appellation Swahili, perhaps due to pejorative connotations

¹⁹ A. I. Salim, 1985:216.

²⁰ Ibid., p.216.

²¹ C. Hobley, 1928:187.

that I discuss in the thesis.²² Though they emerged as a group of converts in Majengo and tried to emulate the Swahili in their cultural practices, they cannot be said to have changed their ethnic identity.²³

Also it is only partly true that converts "left their own tribes and joined" a Muslim community, as Levtzion supposes. Some left their villages and joined the Majengo Muslim communities founded in many towns in Kenya, and the prevalence of Majengo areas in towns today is a testimony to this process. But there were other Muslim converts in many places who did not assume the form of a cohesive group and remained within the local social network. Becoming Muslim and acquiring some external trappings of the Swahili culture, did not (and still does not) confer on such people a new ethnic identity. For example, during the fieldwork, I asked a number of Muslims whether they see themselves as Swahili since they were Muslim and almost all of them objected to the appellation. Some explained that the term 'Swahili' (*Athoiri* in Kimeru) was used derogatorily by others to refer to Muslims in the area.

²² For the discussion on the pejorative connotations of being a Swahili in Meru, see chapter 2, p.103 and 6, p.291.

²³ Perhaps it is necessary to say what I mean by 'ethnic' and what I take to be the difference between the two terms. The term 'ethnic' has the connotation of a people that is linked by a shared national racial or tribal bond, and in this particular case, I agree with Salim that 'Swahili' is not a tribe but a generic term used for a variety of groups of people who have accepted Islam. And culture is shared by members of an ethnic group, it is what makes then an ethnic group. Thus in a sense, an ethnic group is a cultural group, though a cultural group is not necessarily an ethnic group. For instance members of the 'Pagan Cult' in Britain could be defined as a cultural but not an ethnic group. From this perspective, I would suggest, it is erroneous to define the Muslims in the war-torn former Yugoslavia of the 1990s as an ethnic identity. They were either Serbs or Croats before they became Muslim. But for them 'Muslim' has come to denote an ethnic group. This may be a far-fetched example, but what I mean to illustrate is that the two are in a sense one and the same thing, and yet different in another. For an application of Weber's distinction between ethnic group and community for an analysis of the Swahili of Mombasa, see M. J. Swartz, 1979:29-30 (citing M. Weber 1961:306).

Others pointed out what they saw as a contradiction in terms - that a Meru Muslim who has no connection with the coast whatsoever, and in certain cases (which are now on the increase) one who cannot even speak Kiswahili, should be labelled 'Swahili'. The cases of the two women converts and fervent Muslims - Nchulubi and Rabiya - do not show any signs of ethnic or cultural changes. Theirs and other similar cases discussed in the thesis, support Salim's claim that the term is usually imposed by outsiders on people who identify themselves otherwise. The fluidity of the concept of Swahilization supports the assertion that Swahili cannot be regarded as an ethnic identity. There are examples of converts who left their own people to join the Swahili-Muslim community and hence acquired a new ethnic identity, and also there are counter examples of where the acquisition of elements of Swahili culture through conversion did not result in a change in ethnic identity.

From a different perspective, Peel in his comparative study of the Ijebu of Nigeria and the Baganda of Uganda, defines conversion as:

The process by which the primary religious identification of people changes. Despite some dramatic moments this process is drawn out over several decades; and in its later stages it is as much concerned with the "domestication" of the world religion and with the formation of indigenous traditions of Islam and Christianity as it is with the "conquest" of the local society by the world religions.²⁴

The nature and implications of this process of identification, that is whether or not people are called Muslims, are illustrated by the rural case studies that I have presented in this thesis. The conflict between Muslim and other identities is seen in the attempt by some of the women to conceal their Muslim identity when it is necessary to do so. A good number of new converts in the rural areas in Meru, particularly women, prefer to conceal

²⁴ J. D. Y. Peel, 1977:108.

their Muslim identity because such an identity in an area where Muslims constitute a small insignificant minority, is most likely detrimental to their social status.²⁵ That Muslims in Meru are seen as 'Swahili' in the eyes and estimation of others is one thing, but it is quite a different matter whether or not they see themselves as such. That the two levels of recognition are quite different and bear different consequences, cannot be over-stressed.

Until recently, many western scholars attributed an undue virility to Islam in the process of its spread in Africa. To cite but a few examples, von Grunebaum's title to his essay -'Islam: its Inherent power of Expansion and adaptation', bespeaks of the momentum attributed to Islam. In this work, von Grunebaum suggested that it was the universality of Islam which, on the one hand,

facilitated the integration into the community of as yet alien communities by allowing them to carry over into their existence as Muslims much of their traditional way of life; on the other hand, it provided the community with a norm that was all the more readily acceptable because to a large extent there was no insistence on full compliance.²⁶

In this passage, Islam is presented as if it were in control of the contact situation in each case, there with open arms to receive alien communities, and allow them to come 'as they were' by making least demands on them, so to say.

²⁵ I have shown in chapter 6 (pp.293-294) how some local women hide their 'religious clothes' in their bags when going to the Markaz for Friday prayers, for fear of being recognized by other people as Muslims, until they approach the mosque. Muslims have a low esteem in this area and therefore some of them, particularly men, perform magic for gullible people, which lends credibility to their social status. For instance certain Muslim individuals are known for their skill in 'reading for' their clients - the most sought after service is 'reading for' property to keep off potential thieves or vandals, since many local people believe in the efficacy of the protective 'reading' by Muslims.

²⁶ G. E. von Grunebaum, 1964:13.

It is this capacity (to receive new adherents as they are) which, according to Alpers, became an important factor in the expansion of Islam in East and Central Africa.²⁷

Lewis too, subscribes to this idea of Islam's adsorptiveness by suggesting that "as long as traditional beliefs can be adjusted in such a way that they fall within a Muslim schema",²⁸ Islam does not require its new adherents to abandon all their former practices. From yet a different perspective, Oliver reinforces the idea of the strength of Islam vis-a-vis the African traditions by suggesting that:

both Christianity and Islam found a *point d'appui* in the notion of Supreme Being, which lay in the dim background of most of the tribal religions of East Africa. But it is more probable that had the element of monotheism been in fact a considerable one, African beliefs would have offered a stouter resistance than they did.²⁹

According to him, the over-riding importance attached to the ancestral cults and reverence for the traditional practices, weakened the notion of monotheism among traditional African societies.

But recently, voices disclaiming this attitude began to be heard: both Peel and Sanneh speak of 'domestication' but Sanneh gives a different perspective on the relationship between Islam and African traditional practices. He points to a "fundamental incongruity" in that Islam, on the one hand, is inflexible and on the other, it is open and lacks a controversial attitude to religious options. He goes on to argue "that traditional Africa sustained Muslim impact by investing the new religion with its own

²⁷ E. A. Alpers, 1972:173.

²⁸ I. M. Lewis, 1966:60.

²⁹ R. Oliver, 1965:204.

identity, not by yielding to it".³⁰ He sees the Islamic influence in a traditional African setting, where it is naturally in a minority status, as being mitigated by the local customs; the local converts observe the exterior elements but remain indifferent to the inflexible Muslim law and theological issues. Thus, he concludes, it is the African tradition, rather than Islam, which is 'flexible'.

Attributing to Islam that great flexibility which has been associated with it, denies the African traditional communities a "crucial element of their heritage".³¹ Sanneh concludes that Islam does not have the force that the reformers and the Western scholars have claimed for it. He is making a strong case for the potential of the African traditional religions and practices. He refutes claims for Islam's flexibility, religious appeal, and potential to accommodate itself, and the weakness of the African traditional religions when confronted by a 'monotheistic' powerful Islam as presented by Grunebaum and Oliver, for instance.

THE FIELDWORK

A single approach, whether historical, sociological or phenomenological, would not be adequate to provide an in-depth study of Islam among the Meru because of the variety of aspects being examined. Therefore an interdisciplinary approach has been employed that uses the methods of the sociologist and historian: interviews, participant observation, an examination of oral traditions and a study of historical documents.

Initially, I approached the Meru's most prominent Muslim leader who helped to organize interview sessions with the leading individuals and founding pioneers in Meru town. The only problem with this was that after

³⁰ L. Sanneh, 1980:2.

³¹ Ibid., p.6.

three months, I noticed that some people were unwilling to be interviewed or even bluntly refused to see me. When I probed further, I learnt that since I had been introduced at the Friday mosque by this leader, it was assumed by his political opponents that I was in his political camp, and as a result they would not see me. However, as I came to know more people during a period of eight months of initial fieldwork, it became clear to all that research was my sole purpose and gradually I was accepted and became more welcome in their homes. Outside the town where Muslims are few and far between, the mosque was the meeting point, though I visited many at their homes.

Some criteria must be used in determining the sort of people to be interviewed, so Muslim leaders, men and women, the sheikhs and imams, and some of the prominent Muslims in the district were sampled on the basis of their roles and activities within the Muslim communities. It was not difficult to identify potential informants in a community where everyone is known to everyone else and certain individuals are known for their knowledge of specific issues. Also the oldest members of the community are well known to virtually all the residents of a given locality; therefore, after giving the reasons for my visit to someone, I was directed to a potential informant who was either a founding pioneer, a 'learned' sheikh, an anti-*maulid* activist or even a politician. Soon I had a long list of potential informants.

Old Muslims, men and women, were sampled on the basis of their knowledge of the history of the Meru Muslim communities and also their role in the establishment of these communities. In this category are some of the surviving Muslim pioneers or their descendants who could trace their family histories and then explain the circumstances which led to their migration and eventual settlement in Meru, or their absorption into the Muslim communities as the case may be. Key persons such as the *madarasa* teachers and *madarasa* committee members constituted another

category of informants. Also certain individuals, both Muslim and non-Muslim, are reputed for their knowledge of events and general awareness. Some of whom were retired civil servants and occasionally kept diaries or a few other records, either personal or official, which were sometimes useful to the study.

After identifying a potential informant, I would visit her/him either at home, or at their place of work or at the mosque. Places of work varied from the government office, the shop, to the farm. On one occasion, I conducted a three-hour interview with a prominent Muslim in a stone quarry, where he was supervising the chipping of stones for the construction of the local tea factory, for which he was the chairman. On another, I interviewed a local sheikh while he worked in his coffee field. The significance of such interviews lies in the fact that the interviewees did not feel that I was taking too much of their time, and therefore they were quite relaxed and divulged much information in long informal conversations. In this way, I got more information than I did in formal interviews, where the respondents might choose the questions that they would like to answer and the way to answer them.

Group interviews were conducted whenever it was possible; for instance, I went to several *Baraza*, a meeting place where the men often sit and chat. Here (though it was difficult for me being a woman to sit together with men) I managed to interview two or three men together and occasionally they disagreed on certain points, which for me turned out to be important, in that the difference in opinion reflected various dimensions or interpretations of a particular issue. However, this was not always the case: one day, I visited the homestead of the first man in Igembe to work for Edward Butler Horne, the colonial administrator who conquered the Meru and brought them under colonial rule. I went to the house of the second son and sat down for a cup of tea before the interview, but soon news reached two neighbouring homes and his two brothers, accompanied

by another Muslim pioneer, arrived within a half an hour of my arrival. My intention was to interview Saleh, one of the three sons, so I started the interview and the conversation flowed smoothly for about ten minutes, then Said, the oldest of the three brothers, interjected pointing out that his brother was quite young when the particular incident that we were discussing happened, therefore, he (Saleh) did not remember all the details, and in his brother's opinion, his answer missed out some important details. Soon, they engaged in a heated debate, first about the ability to remember things at a certain age; and also the details of the incident in question. Then it was suggested that the oldest brother should, according to the local custom, be allowed to speak first while others listen. But the youngest objected, arguing that since he was a 'learned' Sheikh and hence the most knowledgeable of all of us in the group, he should be the one to speak, not only from his own experience, but also on behalf of his brothers, in spite of the fact that they were older than him. When I intimated my wish to cancel the interview, consensus prevailed that I continue to talk to Saleh, but arrange a separate interview for each of the other three. At that, they left us.

I conducted interviews with the help of a questionnaire which was only followed as a guide in order to avoid extending the discussion further than was useful for the study. The questions were open-ended in order to give the respondents a chance to explain their answers in an informal conversation. In this way it would be possible for me to sift through, and, like a gold-digger, pick^{up} the salient points of the conversation which are relevant to the study. Because of its flexibility, the interview allows room to deviate from the set pattern of questions, and if need be to probe further into areas which might be vague or relevant to the study. This method also allows immediate cross-checking of information. Thus the interview method has its own advantages, the researcher becomes familiar with the research setting, the memory of the interviews and observations, for instance, during the quarry and the coffee field interviews which I have mentioned above,

the discussions that were going on among the workers gave valuable insight into the concerns of the local Muslims: one man said that his wife had joined a local women's self-help group and he did not like it because its members were not Muslims. He went on to explain what, in his opinion, was the best way to relate with non-Muslims. If I had approached this man and asked him what he thought about the relationship with non-Muslims, he might have responded in a different way; during this time, he was talking to his friends, giving them his honest opinion.

In my attempt to understand the various aspects of Islam in this area, I visited homes of Muslims in the town, the rural trade centres, and other rural areas. I attended such ceremonies as *Arubaini*, the feast held forty days after the death of an individual, women's group meetings, and other events organized by or for Muslims. For instance, one day I attended a fund-raising event organized by a local prominent Muslim leader to raise money for the Muslim youth football club to buy balls and other equipment. His wife prepared *uji*, porridge and other foodstuffs which were sold to those present. Since I was also participating, I bought two hundred shillings worth of food for the elderly women, a gesture which was highly appreciated in the Kenyan spirit of Harambee.³² Though this was an impromptu meeting, they managed to raise one thousand and five hundred shillings.

During my visits to different homes, I noticed that in some of them there is plenty of Swahili Islamic paraphernalia, whereas in others there is hardly any tangible Islamic evidence. This variation in the diffusion of Swahili culture in the region reflects, as I will illustrate in this thesis, the disparity of Islamic appropriation.

³² *Harambee* is the political philosophy which has seen Kenya through much of its development. It means "pull together" in order to lift something up. It was introduced by the late president Mzee Jomo Kenyatta soon after independence. Harambee is conducted whenever and wherever money is needed, be it for an individual's hospital bill, for an individual's education abroad, or for the construction of public health centre or a school, people always contribute willingly.

I also attended different mosques on several occasions during which I observed some important aspects: for instance, I found that it was only in one mosque that the Friday *Khutba*, or sermon was read in Arabic and Swahili by the Imam, and then translated into the local language by one of the youths who, during his long stay in Mombasa, had converted to Islam and learnt to read the Qur'an in Arabic.

The interview method was the main method used to obtain the data. Some relevant data was also found in the historical documents of the colonial administrators who wrote copiously to their superiors about matters of day to day administration. The bulk of these are contained in the District Annual Reports, Handing-Over Reports, Political Recordbooks and District Files with official correspondence, which are well preserved in the Kenya National Archives (K.N.A.). While these documents do not deal with Islam, they contain general information about the 'natives', and are useful in fixing precise dates and details of some of the events which affected the Muslims in one way or another, a good example being the details about the demolition of the old Muslim village, found in the district Annual Reports, and other files containing documents on issues related to the municipal administration.

Another important source is the writings of the early missionaries, and administrators who tried to describe the traditional social structures which they encountered. One good example is the writings of District Commissioner, H.E. Lambert who wrote extensively about the Meru country and its people. His papers cover many aspects of Meru culture and history and are deposited in the University of Nairobi Jomo Kenyatta Memorial Library Archives. Loughton, a methodist missionary who worked at Kaaga, the first Methodist station in the area, also wrote about the Meru culture before the colonial intrusion. But these documents have to be studied with caution because many of the pioneer Europeans did not take time to understand the significance of the concepts behind beliefs and practices of

the African peoples and consequently they either misrepresented them in their writings or condemned them wholesale as evil and barbaric. In addition, several sources in the London Public Records Office provided some valuable information.

Use of non-English Terms

The interviews were conducted in Kiswahili and Kimeru and whenever references to the Quran were made, they were in Arabic. I have translated the interview texts into English and where necessary I have retained Kiswahili or Kimeru words and phrases either when the suggested English equivalents are inadequate or do not reflect the concepts embodied in the particular terms. Whenever Swahili words are used, the meaning is given according to the *Standard Swahili-English Dictionary*, and more importantly, the context in which they are used. This is important because, as I shall illustrate in the thesis, many of them have acquired contextual meanings which may be quite different from their original dictionary definitions.

When discussing case studies and interviews, I write Arabic names of people as they are pronounced, that is the local version of the Arabic names. For the definition of Arabic words and concepts to which reference is made in the thesis, I have used the *Encyclopedia of Islam*. No attempt has been made to replace such commonly used Arabic words as *Hajji*, or *Khutba* with English equivalents, though their meanings are given alongside. For references to the Qur'an, I have used Yusuf Ali's *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary*. Finally, names of places that have been mentioned in the thesis are shown in the maps.

THE MERU PEOPLE

The term Meru (pronounced as *miiru*) generally refers to both the Kimeru-speaking³³ peoples, and the administrative unit or district which they occupy and the major town which serves as the district headquarters. However, the people prefer to call themselves Ameru. Meru district is located in the area adjoining the eastern slopes of Mt. Kenya, on the highlands east of the Rift Valley, some 250 kilometres north-east of Nairobi. The Meru ethnic group comprises the following congeries: Igembe, Tigania, Imenti, Igoji, Mwimbi, Muthambi, Tharaka and Chuka. All together they number about 1.3 million.³⁴ The mutually intelligible dialects of Kimeru, the language spoken by the Meru peoples, correspond to these sub-groups. The relations between the various sub-groups were governed by *ichiario*, loosely translated as blood brotherhood or ritual alliance.³⁵ Recently, in 1992, the district was divided into two districts and one sub-district: Tharaka-Nithi, Meru and Nyambene district, but it is clear that Meru Town will continue to serve as an important centre for trade and communication networks with other districts to the drier northern parts of the Eastern Province.

³³ In Kiswahili and many other languages in the widely popularized Bantu linguistic classification, KI- is prefixed to differentiate a language from its speakers, for example, **Ki**-Swahili for the Swahili language. The same applies to the use of **Kimeru** and **Ki-Nubi** in the thesis.

³⁴ *Economic Survey* 1991, Ministry of Planning and National Development, Nairobi, May 1991.

³⁵ J. A. Fadiman, 1976:16-18.

Cosmology and World View

Before the advent of both Islam and Christianity, the Meru had a well developed concept of God, *Murungu*, whose abode was atop the highest peak of Kirimara or Mount Kenya and Njaambene, the ridge of mountains lying between Tigania and Igembe. Kirimara means "the one with patches", in this case white patches of snow. The mountain is a spectacle to behold in the early morning of a bright day when the clouds uncover the peaks. The European explorers and 'discoverers' of the African mountains and rivers, were also fascinated by the snow-capped tropical mountain situated on the Equator, when they "discovered" it in 1849. The Meru invoked the *Ngai e-Kirimara*, that is the God of Kirimara and *Ngai e-Njaambene* or the God of Njaambene. Baikiao describes in detail the religious symbolism of both mountains to the Meru people.³⁶

Njaambene which is almost at the centre of Meru country is a very significant sacred place for it is there that the offering of the most important sacrifices for a section or the whole of Meru takes place. *Njaamba* means male, strong and masculine. Baikiao argues that the name of the mountain means the male, the strong one. He extends the symbolism further by quoting a Meru prophet who told him that "Njaambene is the male organ on earth".³⁷ However, the point here is not to question the historical validity of this assertion, but to illustrate the special religious significance of Njaambene to the Meru people. There are a host of other sacred places and things: rivers, swamps, animals, plants, colours; and numerous auspicious occasions.

³⁶ J. M. Baikiao, 1977:130-132.

³⁷ J. M. Baikiao, 1977:133.

The ancestors are also central to the Meru practices. The spirits of the ancestors maintain contact with the living and their presence continues to be experienced as they safeguard the Meru customs. By violating the customs, one automatically renders oneself ritually impure, *muiri*, a condition which causes calamity to the victim and those related to her or him, if the prescribed purification procedure is not adhered to.

The most important religious and public office was that of *Muwe(gwe)*. He was revered and consulted by the people when the need arose. According to Baikiao, "the greatest degree of priestly powers was in the Mugwe"³⁸ who came from designated clans which were historically connected with the myth of origin, the migration and settlement of the Meru in their present country.³⁹ It is difficult now to get authentic information about the office of *Muwe* because the myth and secrecy that surround it are compounded by the fact that the office is now extinct. The early European missionaries like Bernardi, who wrote about the *Muwe*, erroneously assumed that he was a prophet and, accordingly, titled his study of this great religious office *The Mugwe: A Failing Prophet*.⁴⁰ Prophets were in a category of their own. They spoke to God and their main duty was to predict the future and warn the people of the impending danger: for example, the advent of the Europeans had been foretold several

³⁸ J. M. Baikiao, 1977:158.

³⁹ Previous studies on the myths of origin of the Meru say that they migrated from Mbwa, an Island off the East African coast and arrived in their present country in the 1730s (J.Fadiman, 1976a:139:168). also see E.B.Horne (1918) in Meru Political Recordbook, K.N.A. DC/MRU/1/1. But A. M. M'Imanyara (1992:1-76) has restated the theory of origin and migration of the Meru, tracing the history of the Meru to North-East Africa along the Nile valley, from where, he argues, they moved towards their present country in 1400. he has assembled and analyzed new evidence to show that the popularized Mbwa tradition does not refer to an Island off the East African coast, but to the conquest of the Meroe Kingdom by Axum in AD 350 and captivity of its inhabitants by Red People, nicknamed *Nguu Ntune* by the ancestors of the Meru.

⁴⁰ B. Bernardi, 1959.

generations before. The prophets predicted total destruction by the invaders and explained that their power would be irresistible. The effect of this prophecy will be illustrated later in the discussion about the arrival of Edward Butler Horne, the British administrator who conquered the Meru.

OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

Chapter one describes the opening of Meru as an administrative station and the establishment of the pioneer Muslim communities. The foundations of Islam in Meru are discussed here in a historical perspective.

In chapter 2, the concepts of *ungwana* and *ushenzi* are traced to the coast and the representation of Islam in Meru is discussed in the light of the struggle between *dini* and *ushenzi*. In addition, some elements of the Meru culture are explained and the last part of the chapter shows how the initial response of the Meru people to Islam was shaped by these, and examines the role of other extraneous factors such as the government attitude in which Christian missionaries found support and the Muslims disfavour.

Chapter 3 explores the emerging urban Muslim community identity in the face of the social changes, resulting from the nationalist struggle, and the impact of the newly achieved independence on the Muslims in Meru. Here the re-definition of the old concept of birth in the faith and the new meaning with which it is charged in order to forge Muslim unity in the face of an external threat, is analyzed. The dissolving of the hitherto clear social boundaries is related to re-definition of the Muslim community in relation and opposition to others.

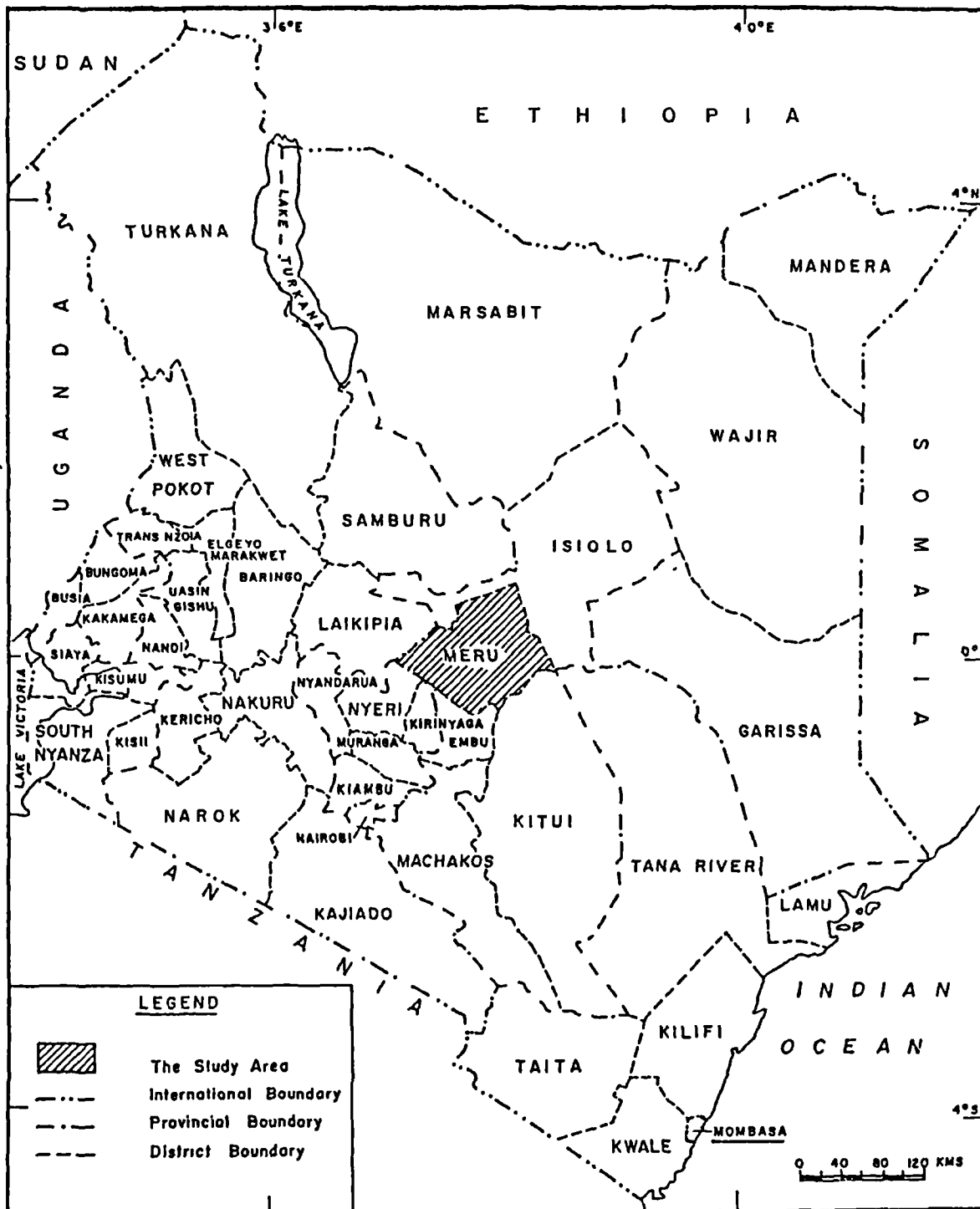
Chapter 4 discusses attempts to penetrate this emerging Muslim community by the cult of Sheikh Hussein of Bale. Due to the notion of birth in *dini*, it fails to entrench itself in the urban Muslim community, but

succeeds, albeit briefly in the rural areas of Igembe where Muslims are few and far between, without the social and religious network that is the foundation of the urban Majengo Muslim community.

Chapter 5 examines the social-religious network that makes Majengo a cultural Island, underpinned by the 'fossilized' Swahili notions of *dini* and civility. The spatial significance of Majengo in facilitating community construction, enhancing the process of Swahilization and thus Islamization, is analyzed.

Chapter 6 completes the picture of Islam in Meru by examining, through the various case studies, the perception and practice of Islam outside the enclaves of Majengo and Mjini in Meru town. The practices of the rural Muslims are examined in the context of the local culture and the conflicting identities (Muslim and other) are highlighted. The role of *Tabligh* and the recent spread of Islam are explored, focussing on the type of Islam that is represented in these areas.

In chapter 7, conversion to Islam is placed within a theoretical perspective. The local representation of Islam is analyzed in the light of the debate between Humphrey Fisher and Horton, with a view to testing the applicability of the three-stage theory of conversion to the case of Meru.



MAP I MERU DISTRICT IN THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

CHAPTER 1

FOUNDATIONS OF MUSLIM PRESENCE IN MERU

The Opening up of the *Boma*¹

Diffusion of Islam was the unintended result of the establishment of colonial administrative stations inland. In the African quarters of these stations developed the settlements which came to be known as Majengo.² These Majengo, now found in almost every town in Kenya, formed the nucleus of the African Muslim communities, as we shall demonstrate with reference to Meru. The first station to be opened in what was then Kenya province was Fort Hall, now Murang'a,³ which was occupied in 1900. In 1906, an expedition was sent to Embu and after the ensuing encounter, the Embu resistance was broken and a station was opened. To control the communities still further to the north on the eastern slopes of Mount Kenya, Edward Butler Horne, then Acting District Commissioner, moved towards Meru in 1908. The psychological weight of the prophecies⁴ which

¹ The Standard Swahili-English Dictionary defines *Boma* as "any kind of raised structure for defensive purposes". *Boma* also means a homestead, but in the context of the administrative centres that were opened inland, it means station.

² *Majengo* means buildings, but most of the African quarters in many Kenyan towns, initially occupied by Muslims are now known as Majengo. The Majengo social network will be discussed in chapter 5, pp. 206-212.

³ G. St. J. Orde-Brown, 1925:33.

⁴ Oral accounts say that the coming of the Europeans to Meru had been predicted beforehand. My informants said that the Meru prophets predicted total destruction by the invaders and explained that it was not possible for the Meru people to forestall the impending calamity. However, it was against the Meru warriorhood to submit to an enemy, so when the Europeans arrived, a conflict arose between the elders and the warriors. The latter were thoroughly enraged by the prophecies which they considered to be defeatist, but the elders maintained supremacy over the "hot-blooded" youths and their wisdom revealed the futility of mass action. According to

had predicted the coming of the white man, were apparently now being fulfilled, and the defeat of the Embu in the previous year, convinced the Mwimbi (one of the 9 sections that comprise the Meru ethnic group) of the futility of resistance.

In May 1908, Horne arrived with two officers and a company of 3rd King's African Rifles and camped at Mwitari's.⁵ On 4th June, Horne and the K.A.R. made their permanent camp, that came to be known as *Boma* at the edge of the surrounding forest. Part of the ridge was covered by a forest, which was believed to be inhabited by spirits and so he was allowed to camp there by the Meru elders in the hope that he would be dealt with by both the spirits and the fierce Maasai who raided the area occasionally.⁶ It was also hoped that the white man would soon leave the area since it had not dawned on the Meru that Horne's mission and settlement were of a more permanent nature than the 'passing visitor' that they imagined he was.⁷

the prevailing social order the supreme council of elders, *njuri*, had the final word on matters of national importance, therefore, they prevailed on the "hot-blooded" warriors and ruled out an outright war. For more information on the Meru encounter with the European colonialists, see J. A. Fadiman (1979:12-34). W. A. Chanler (1896:242-261) describes the Meru social political structure prior to the conquest and introduction of Western influence.

⁵ See Political Record Book 1908 and District Annual Report 1908, K.N.A. DC/MRU/1/1.

⁶ A. J. Fadiman, 1979:37.

⁷ Horne to D.C Meru 14/1/1929 in K.N.A. DC/MRU/4/2. Horne's camp was called *Mutindwa jwa Kangangi* by the local people. Kangangi, the wanderer, was the name given to Horne by the Meru people and the one by which he was known throughout the district.

Horne established his headquarters at a place which he considered strategic for his administrative purposes. The station buildings were erected by local labour under the supervision of the district commissioner (D.C.). and by 1912, it was reported that:

They consist of the District Commissioner's house, (a new two storied log building erected during the past year), two Assistant District Commissioners' houses, two clerks' houses, Sub-Assistant Surgeon's house, dispensary, six hospital huts, two offices, goal, store, police lines, guard room, goal warder's lines, Tribal Retainers' lines, porters' lines and houses of office staff.⁸

It is here in the *boma*, and by the occupants of these quarters, that the first seeds of Muslim presence in Meru were sown. This will be illustrated by the gradual transformation of the porters' lines into what came to be known as the "Swahili village" in the district annual reports. No sooner was the construction completed than Horne began to make his presence felt, by ruthlessly crushing any resistance to his imposed authority, though the inhabitants of Tharaka and Tigania areas of the district continued to cause "a great deal of trouble."⁹

In order for Horne and his administration to establish firm control over the rather large Meru administrative unit, it became necessary for a second station to be opened at Maua in Igembe in the northern part of the district. By the proclamation of 13th March 1911, the boundaries of the township were defined under the "East African Outlying Districts Ordinance" of 1902 and the Governor excluded the township of Meru from

⁸ Annual Report On Meru District for the Year 1912, K.N.A. DC/MRU/1/1, p.26.

⁹ Horne ordered a half A Company of his accompanying K.A.R. to carry out punitive measures to subjugate Tigania and Tharaka, both of whom presented organized military resistance to him, H.C. Moyse-Bartlett 1956:204-29.

"the Native Reserve"¹⁰. After it was declared a trade centre, Meru township was enlarged, more land was obtained by paying compensation to the people living in the immediate vicinity. When Meru was gazetted as a township in May of the same year (1911), it comprised an area of "a radius of one mile from the government flag-staff" and the township rules were thereafter applied to this area - about four hundred acres.¹¹ In 1914, the township was surveyed with the object of canceling the original gazette notice. Again, it was deemed necessary to acquire more land and the neighbouring Meru people were compensated and promised that no more land would be taken from them in future.¹²

At the same time, an area to the west of the station was reserved for the European location; and provision made for the African general produce market, butter market and cattle market. This arrangement was considered satisfactory except for the "proximity of native markets to the D.C's house."¹³ The gates of the *boma* were kept by twenty to thirty warriors, whose duty was to ensure that unauthorized persons were kept out of the station. At the same time, they served as messengers and letter carriers, the latter being an essential service in the absence of the postal system in the district. Indeed it was not until 1916/17 that the Telegraph finally passed through Meru, from western Kenya to Northern Frontier District via Archer's Post.

¹⁰ Provincial Commissioner Nyeri to D.C Meru, 9/6/1948 in K.N.A. DC/MRU/2/9/2

¹¹ 1912-13 Annual Report, K.N.A. DC/MRU/1/1.

¹² E. B. Horne to D.C 14/1/1929, DC/MRU/4/2.

¹³ Annual Report, 1912/1913, DC/MRU/1/1.

The Governor's decision to exclude the township of Meru from "the Native Reserve", that is the rest of the district, and the application of the township rules, restricted the movement of people in and out of the station, and thus facilitated the creation of enclaves in the station.

From "Porters' Lines" to "Swahili Village"

Besides the K.A.R. company, Horne was accompanied by a host of colonial servants: police, clerical officers, and others, all of whom were settled in the *boma*, to perform various tasks for the realization of the conquest of the people of Meru and the establishment of British rule on the Eastern slopes of Mt. Kenya and beyond. Of these, the porters played a key role in providing the much needed transport for the administration.¹⁴ In this section, I shall show how the "porters' lines", in the *boma* layout described above, metamorphosed into the "Swahili village".

Within less than a year of opening up the station, even before its boundaries were defined, a number of traders¹⁵ flocked in and set

¹⁴ Porterage had become "a very lucrative profession before the advent of the rail for it was the only viable means of transport" (Y. A. Nzibo 1986:23). W. A. Chanler (1896:5) also observes that "the use of Wapagazi, porters had been of prime importance in the opening up of East Africa". Further information about this class of people, whose place in the history of East Africa has been relegated to that of the unsung heroes, in spite of the ordeals through which they went on those long and treacherous journeys, bearing on their shoulders both the loads and the famous 'discoverers' of the African mountains and rivers, is provided by C. Hobley, 1928:187.

¹⁵ Osman Yakub, for example, claims to "have been trading at Meru since 1909 (nearly 40 years after),... dealing in country produce and general merchandise - mostly for the requirement of Africans. The first time, Mr.E. B. Horne, the then Commissioner, established a Boma at Meru, I went there and started my shop..." Osman Yakub writing to the D.C., regarding allocation of a business plot, 9th march, 1949, DC/MRU/2/9/2. Some of the other Asian traders were Mohammed Moti, Habib Ahmed, Jamal brothers, Rahmtula Ahmed, Gani Kassam, Ibrahim Ahmed, Arbi Hasham, Omar Ismali, Ayub Yakub, Ali Mohammed Tayab, Adam Noor Mohammed, Ahmed

themselves up. Reporting on the progress of the station in 1912, the D.C. noted that there were "35 Asiatics and 100 Mohammedan Africans."¹⁶ The population at the station was growing so fast that the number of resident Africans rose to 320 by the end of the year. Of these, 100 were employed in the government service, the majority of the remainder being engaged in trade of a "general nature". It is useful for us to note that, from the outset, there are distinct features reflecting the distinct sections of the population in the *boma*: the "police lines"; the army quarters; and the "porters' lines". As each of these "lines" and quarters evolved into a separate settlement, we see the genesis of Muslim presence in Meru. That the D.C.'s report notes the presence of 100 African Muslims out of the official figure of 320 Africans, cannot go unnoticed - it suggests that 31.3% of the African population in the station at that time was Muslim.

On arrival at the site, there were hardly any women among Horne's men, but soon they arrived and out of the 320 Africans in the station, 90 were women. This rapid increase of women accords with Cohen's observation that

A sizeable and stable stock of women is always necessary to ensure stability of settlement. Women provide sexual services and companionship for men, maintain households, bear children and run special trades. It is for this reason that sociologists have measured the stability of migrant communities in African towns by the proportion of women to the men in them.¹⁷

Walji and Bechar Dhanji, among others. Annual Report, 1915-16, DC/MRU/1/1. Also see DC/MRU/4/2.

¹⁶ Annual Report, 1915-16 DC/MRU/1/1.

¹⁷ A. Cohen, 1969:51.

Following Cohen, then we can say that the station was becoming increasingly stable as the number of resident women rose steadily. Who then were these Africans? Once the colonial authority was established, the bulk of the workforce was obtained from the traditionally Muslim coastal towns of Lamu, Malindi and Mombasa.¹⁸ In addition to these, there were people from the interior of Tanzania, especially the Nyamwezi; and others from as far as the Congo, Malawi (then Nyasaland) and the Comoro Islands,¹⁹ all of whom had been Islamized and evidently Swahilized over the years.²⁰ On arrival in Meru, these diverse groups of people were allocated separate residential quarters, either as police, the K.A.R. servicemen, or the miscellaneous group in the porters' lines. It is to the latter that the label "Swahili" came to be attached, both by themselves and the colonial administrators. Their Swahili identity and its implications for Islam in Meru is examined in chapter 2 and therefore, at this point I shall not enter into the debate on the definition of Swahili. However, the point that needs emphasizing here is that all Swahili in Meru are Muslims, and therefore, when I speak of Swahili I am speaking of Muslims.

Within a period of three years, the porters' lines assumed the shape of an organized settlement and became known as the "Swahili village". The district annual report shows that, by 1912, 21 plots in this area had been let out to the Swahili. In the adjoining area, 11 plots were let out to the "Asiatics".²¹ The K.A.R. and the police, each had their own "lines", as they were then called.

¹⁸ Y. A. Nzibo, 1986:123.

¹⁹ C. Hobley, 1928:187.

²⁰ The process of Swahilization is dealt with later on in the thesis, see chapter 2, p.80.

²¹ These Asiatics were the Indian traders mentioned above. The terms "Asians" and "Indians" are usually applied with reference to people of Indian and Pakistan origin, and are used interchangeably in Kenya.

In 1913, three more plots were "taken up for Swahili houses, necessitating the starting of a new line of these".²² The important point for our purpose is that the steady growth of the population in the settlement was contemporaneous with the emergence of a definite Swahili character. When these new houses are added, the Swahili population gained not only three more individuals or families, but any number of people that could possibly occupy the three houses on the newly acquired plots. It was the humbler counterparts of the great Zanzibari, old Mombasa town and Lamu waterfronts which inspired the Swahili house²³ that is now prevalent in Majengo far from the coast in many inland towns of Kenya. A distinction should be made here between the complex Swahili stone house found in the old coastal towns and the simple more typical Swahili type of house, found in Majengo in the inland towns.

Before entering into the analysis of the formation of Majengo in Meru, a brief description of both the physical features and the social network of Majengo in general, may provide a sociological framework in which the formation and the development of Meru Muslim settlements can be understood, for in them one finds both the local and the coastal elements woven into a culture that is identified with, and unique to every Majengo.

It must be emphasized here that Majengo are a common phenomenon in many urban centres in the interior. Life in a Majengo is quite different from that of its environs, in fact peculiar to itself. The Majengo phenomenon can be traced to the latter part of the nineteenth century.

²² Annual Report 1913-14, DC/MRU/1/1.

²³ J. de V. Allen, 1979 (*passim*) has given an interesting analysis of the significance of the social and spatial context of the Swahili house in the old coastal towns.

Allen states that

as soon as urban settlements were established in the interior during the second half of the nineteenth century they adopted a recognizably Swahili character...²⁴

It is to the more glorious settlements of the 18th century, that these owe their 'Swahiliness'. The key feature of the ancient coastal settlements was the spatial unit known as *mtaa* (plural *mitaa*).²⁵ In its literal sense the word *mtaa* means 'piece' or 'portion' but when used for units of settlements it may be translated both as 'ward' or 'quarter' and also as 'moiety' or 'deme'.²⁶ Originally, the *mtaa* system reflected kinship affinities and extended horizontally in order to accommodate the ever-increasing relatives of the *mtaa* heads, who were at the same time lineage heads. Gradually the *mtaa* lost its kinship features and lineage heads were replaced by community representatives to the town council.²⁷ In its function, the pre-nineteenth century *mtaa* was a unit of social organization. In his study of the Swahili neighbourhood groups in Ujiji, a town in the interior of Tanzania, Hino raises some interesting points on the functions of these groups. He observes that three or four households make the smallest unit of neighbourhood, whose relationship is based on the common use of the *ua*, backyard of the Swahili-style house found in Ujiji. There are cordial relations among the *ua* users, who refer to one another fondly as *ndugu*, brother for men and *shemeji*, brother's wife for women; and "they are aware of the fact that joint usage of *ua* means intimacy of members..."²⁸

²⁴ J. de V. Allen, 1980:325.

²⁵ The concept and function of *mtaa* with regard to Majengo is discussed in chapter 5, pp.238-239.

²⁶ J. Middleton, 1993:56.

²⁷ J. de V. Allen, 1979:4.

²⁸ S. Hino, 1971:13.

Social functions of *ua moja*, common/shared backyard groups include giving such mutual help as borrowing and lending money and cooperation and assistance during wedding ceremonies.

Ujiji differs from Meru in some important respects: owing its establishment to the trade routes, it is not a colonial creation and its relations with the coastal Arabs predate the colonial administration in the interior of Tanzania. In this 19th century Swahili (Muslim) settlement, the concept of *mtaa*, and to a certain extent its functions, are replaced by *ua*. There are two possible explanations for this: first, as Allen notes that *mtaa* has already lost its kinship affinities;²⁹ and the second reason, is that the pioneers of this upcountry settlement were diverse communities finding convergence in Islam and Swahili culture as Muslims and not as members of specific lineages.

However, the twentieth century Majengo, though "recognizably Swahili"³⁰ in character, appears to be a poor replica of its predecessor. Certain symbols are carried over and employed in the new settlements, even when the ideas these symbols seek to express bear no semblance with the original concepts. An example is *mtaa*, which is now applied to rows of houses in a Majengo. Though the term has long lost its original meaning and function as a social unit, one hears it being used in every-day conversation with reference to rows of houses not only in a Majengo, but also in the rural trade centres, by individuals who have probably only heard the word and perhaps are not cognizant of its historical and social implications. The concept of *mtaa* has continued to change, and now to many people it has acquired pejorative meanings. This is especially so because Majengo is no longer exclusively Swahili: many other residents, especially women in search of cheap accommodation, have invaded almost

²⁹ J. de V. Allen 1979:4.

³⁰ J. de V. Allen, 1980:315.

every Majengo, with the result that the Majengo have become congested residential areas.

To a casual observer, one Majengo is like any other: rows of mud-walled houses with rusty tin roofs, occupied by *leso*³¹ and *buibui*-clad³² women; narrow dusty littered alleys, where walk a turbaned sheikh, a *madrasa* teacher and the rest of the menfolk in cap, *kanzu* (long shirt) and sandals; while the children, clearly oblivious of their surroundings, play happily in the open sewers in front of the houses. One or two small shops are kept open to supply such basic commodities as cigarettes (as most of the elderly women smoke), sugar, salt, etc.; while a number of women sell vegetables and *vitumbua*, a kind of doughnut, in front of their houses. But a closer sociological examination of these apparently similar features, would reveal that each Majengo has its peculiar characteristics owing to such factors as, for instance, the social-economic set-up of the resident communities; and more importantly, the historical background to their establishment. Even within Meru itself, the three settlements differed in several respects to which we shall allude as we go along. Therefore, one cannot make substantive generalizations about them, each one merits its own study. Be that as it may, one can generally say that, since all Majengo have been founded by the so-called Swahili, and since they are occupied mainly by Muslims, though many other people, especially women, have always found solace there, they are separate cultural entities.

It may appear as if this cultural distinction is being threatened by the stream of low-wage earners, the unemployed and women, for whom the

³¹ *Leso* is a piece of cotton coloured cloth. Two pieces of cloth, are worn by Swahili women, one is wrapped around the waist to cover the lower part of the body, and the other is used to cover the head and the shoulders.

³² *Bui bui* is a black cloak and veil worn by Muslim women in Kenya. It originated in Hadhramaut and by 1910, it was becoming increasingly popular in Mombasa. It gave its users a sense of respectability, see M. Strobel, 1975:70-72.

Majengo in big towns have become focal points, owing to the availability of cheap alternative accommodation there. Another pull factor is the ease with which the new arrivals are almost naturally integrated into the resident community. Yet it is this process of integration and assimilation of newcomers, which ensures not only the survival, but also the growth of the Swahili culture in these settlements. Even without necessarily converting to Islam, many of the newcomers adopt the Swahili material culture: mode of dress, types of food, and with the adoption of the Swahili language, which is the *lingua franca* in the multi-ethnic urban society, they begin to use such Islamic expressions as *wallahi*, thus accentuating the dominance of the Swahili-Islamic character of Majengo. As will be shown later, Salim queries Allen's suggestion that one can become a *Mswahili* without being a Muslim, in other words, the possibility of divorcing Swahili culture from Islam.³³

As has been said above, Majengo are built of mud-and-wood, originally roofed with *madebe*, open flattened tins. Most of the original houses still stand in many Majengo, even in Pumwani in Nairobi, though demolition has been haunting Pumwani for more than two decades. Bujra aptly describes Pumwani, which is the first of them and has, therefore, continued to serve as the prototype for other Majengo in the interior thus:

Pumwani stands incongruously from its surroundings looking more like a coastal village than a city housing area.³⁴

Each Swahili settlement, as Middleton observes, sees itself as "being on another level a separate Umma, a sacred centre set in the wilderness of unbelievers".³⁵

³³ A. I. Salim, 1985:216-218.

³⁴ J. Bujra, 1974:219.

³⁵ J. Middleton, 1993:161.

Amongst the wood-and-mud structures in almost any Majengo, one finds a magnificent stone mosque building,³⁶ with its beautiful, usually white minarets³⁷ and green domes towering over the rusty tin roofs of the settlement. The contrast between the impressive building and its humble neighbourhood is striking.³⁸ However, each Majengo has its peculiar characteristics and even within the same region, one observes certain disparities among the resident Muslim communities.

The influence of the Swahili house is perceptible even on non-Muslims from the interior, who travelled to towns in the early days and on return home, constructed 'square houses' in imitation of the Swahili houses in which they had lived either in Pumwani in Nairobi or in any other town. The ability to build a 'square house' in the rural areas in the early days was a source of prestige and one automatically acquired a higher social status among one's neighbours. Gradually the 'square houses' replaced the traditional round mud-and-thatch houses in many parts of Meru.

The mud-and-wattle type of Swahili house that is found in all Majengo, normally has four or more rooms divided by a corridor running through to the back of the house, connecting the front and rear entrances. In these rooms, whole families lived and as was the custom, in Meru, the Swahili residents, most of whom had married local women, were visited by their wives' relatives from the rural areas, who would live with them for

³⁶ Each of these mosques has its own history. Some of them have been constructed with assistance from foreign donors through the Islamic Foundation. Others have been built either by individuals or through the collective efforts of the local residents.

³⁷ A. A. Mazrui and Zirimu, P. (1990:50) say that "the minaret on its own embodies not just worship but also aesthetics, architecture, and a sense of geography".

³⁸ P. Garlake (1966:3) too, observes that a mosque could be the only stone building in a mud-and-thatch settlement.

quite some time before returning to their villages. In a number of cases, the rural visitors, finding the town life better, would not return to the village. From accounts given by my informants, it is also evident that many relatives and friends of the Swahili pioneers travelled a long way to join them and a number of these would settle down and try to find jobs or engage in trade, thus helping to swell the Swahili Muslim population, which by 1915 was clearly well established within Meru township.

As more workers, traders and all sorts of people came into the growing town, the demand for accommodation increased tremendously. Consequently, two to three "out-houses" were attached to the main houses. These out-houses were mostly rented out to tenants together with some of the rooms in the main houses. The out-houses were popular in the Swahili village mainly because it was the only way of acquiring extra rooms and thus an extra source of income, on the same plot of land. Plots were allocated to certain categories of people, and even then certain criteria, as we shall illustrate with regard to the Nubian village, were applied, making the process rather tedious. Therefore, in spite of the additional out-houses, the number of the original plots and houses remained unchanged in the official records, but an examination of the population figures tabulated in the D.C.'s report,³⁹ shows that the number of residents was far greater than the official number of houses could possibly accommodate. It is therefore clear that the official number of houses was not representative of the actual resident population in the settlement which had come to be known as the Swahili village by 1912.

The haphazard construction of out-houses posed a health hazard which continually incurred the wrath of almost every medical officer who served in Meru. In one of the reports it is reported that

³⁹ 1925 Annual Report DC/MRU/1/2 shows that there were 29 officially allocated plots which were all occupied by Swahili houses, with a resident population of 299 persons.

The Swahili, Nubians, etc. live in houses built on the Swahili principle. The Swahili practice of surrounding each house with a fence of sorts and of building a collection of smaller huts at the rear of the main house has to be condemned. Plans of houses and buildings to be erected are not submitted to the medical officer, and as a result, Europeans, Indians, natives, are free to erect any buildings.⁴⁰

The existence of a sizeable Swahili community at this time was acknowledged by the D.C. in his observation that during the First World War, "the Swahili population responded loyally to the demand for stretcher-bearers with the carrier corps..."⁴¹ It has been stated above that the members of the group that was designated 'Swahili' came from various ethnic backgrounds, but concepts deriving from the coastal Swahili culture formed the basis for the creation of a community for which Islam reinforced unity and gave a sense of identity .

The definition of the Swahili has intrigued scholars, Allen and Salim, among others, have tussled with it for years, producing long treatises but showing no signs of consensus on who these "elusive"⁴² people or peoples are. In her study on the Swahili medicine, Becklerg doubtfully refers to them as "Swahili, if at all...",⁴³ it is this feeling of doubt which seems to dominate the minds of the Swahili historians, for so far none has come up with a satisfactory definition.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Annual Medical Report, 1926 DC/MRU/1/2.

⁴¹ Annual Report, 1915-16 DC/MRU/1/1.

⁴² A. I. Salim, 1985:215.

⁴³ S. Beckerleg, 1990:24.

⁴⁴ For more information on the long search for a satisfactory definition of the Waswahili and their identity, which A. I. Salim (1985 *passim*) has aptly summed up as "elusive", see J. de V. Allen, who has written more

The Indian Bazaar

By 1912 there was a significant Asian population, a number of them having arrived in Meru soon after the opening up of the station. Nearly all of them were traders, apparently trying to cash in on the new station. The D.C reports that

in spite of the fact that the roads are not yet finished, Indians' wagons have arrived in Meru from Nyeri and Archer's Post and from Meru have journeyed to Fort Hall via Embu. This shows the keenness of the Indians on wagon transport...⁴⁵

They put up shops which served as residential-cum-business premises in the area that came to be known as the "Indian bazaar", close by the Swahili location. It seems, at that time, that there was pressure on the administration (from the traders) to increase the size of the bazaar but the D.C objected, feeling that "all sections of the township community"⁴⁶ should be content with the available amenities. So far, the township was being maintained in clean and sanitary condition, as four men were paid by the Swahili and the Indian communities for sweeping and cleaning their location.⁴⁷ It is necessary to point out that at that time (1912), there were only two officially designated residential "locations" within the township -

extensively on the subject than any other scholar: 1973, 1974, 1976a, 1976b, 1979, and his most recent work titled *Swahili Origins*, published posthumously in 1993. Also see C. Eastman 1971:228-236, W. Arens, 1975:425-38. J. Middleton, 1992:2 adds that the non-linguistic criterion for defining the Swahili is that they have long been Muslims.

⁴⁵ Annual Report, 1916-17, DC/MRU/1/1.

⁴⁶ Annual Report, 1911-12, DC/MRU/1/1.

⁴⁷ Annual Report, 1915-16, DC/MRU/1/1.

the K.A.R. and the police had their own separate quarters, which were referred to as "lines" in contrast to the Swahili and Asian "locations".

A mosque situated at one end of the location, was used by both the Swahili and the Sunni Asians. In 1915, the road through the Swahili and Asian area was widened to a hundred feet, with the result that the houses of the Swahili were moved back and rebuilt. The *boma*, as the station was still called, was slightly enlarged at the south-western corner by clearing the bush; and "Askaris' lines are moved and rebuilt on the new township site".⁴⁸

A few of the Asians were in government service as clerks to the administration and the K.A.R.; others included the Sub-Assistant Surgeon, the post master, and the labour recruiters and their families. Though it is certain that the majority of the Indians were Muslims, reliable information is not available on their sectarian distribution. The records show that both the Ismailis and the Ahmadis had separate mosques: the "Ahamediyya Mosque building, Plot No. 20".⁴⁹

After the First World War, the D.C., basing his observation on the general effects of the war on the district, reported that:

the Indians...do not seem to be on very good terms with one another. This would appear to be due to the fact that, owing to lack of trade, competition is very keen, and this seems to affect their social as well as business relations.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Construction of Roads and buildings, 1911-25, DC/MRU/4/1.

⁴⁹ Osman Yakub to D.C. 9th March, 1948 DC/MRU/2/9/2.

⁵⁰ Annual Report, 1920-21, DC/MRU/1/1.

On the contrary, my informants were of the opinion that the tension between the Indians was religious rather than commercial - the Ahmadis faced stiff opposition from the Sunnis, and this was couched in terms of trade rivalry.⁵¹ One informant explained that it was due to this rivalry that some prominent Sunnis exercised their influence on the administration during the allocation of plots in the new township plan, with the result that the Ahmadis were not allotted a new site for their mosque; while the Ismailis received sympathetic consideration, when the area occupied by their mosque was taken up for the new class B business area:

Aga Khan Mosque. This is on a plot held on Temporary Occupation Licence free of rental. The building is made of C.I.sheets on wooden framework on piles, and I do not think there will be any difficulty about getting the local Ismaili Khoja Community to agree to move it to another site, possibly with payment in compensation for disturbance by the Local Native Council.⁵²

As I have said above, the Indians were "keen" to link the new station with others, in a trade network. The main items of trade were hides and skins, bees-wax, ghee, livestock and cloth.⁵³ The Bazaar, like the Swahili village, soon became the subject of condemnation by almost every Medical Officer, for instance, in the 1926 report on the sanitation of the township, the Bazaar is described thus:

⁵¹ Interview with Mwanaidi and Hamza, Makandune, December 1991.

⁵² D.C. to The Hon. Ag. Provincial Commissioner, Central Province, Nyeri, 2nd March 1939 in DC/MRU/2/9/2.

⁵³ Townships and Trading Centres, DC/MRU/4/2.

The Indian dukas consist of dark badly ventilated and overcrowded tin and wooden shanties which are held on a temporary occupation licence. The town planning scheme submitted two years ago has not materialized and it seems unlikely that anything will be done for some time. This uncertainty as to the future of the Bazaar prevents the duka owners who are... more disinclined than ever to effect any improvements in their dwellings.⁵⁴

In spite of these reports, the sanitary condition of the Bazaar did not show any signs of improvement, and once again in 1931, it was said to be "a model of insanitation". It seems that it was not possible to improve the condition of the Bazaar, which the officer describes rather tendentiously, "as the worst in Kenya" by 1939. Though each time the township development plan had been drawn, discussed and then left in abeyance, the situation was later complicated by the numbers:

the real problem will be what to do with the surplus Indian population. These people will have to live somewhere and many of them are too poor to acquire plots in the new bazaar or elsewhere.⁵⁵

This is a testimony to the presence of a relatively large number of Asians in Meru. My informants are unanimous that the greater majority of them were Muslims of both Shia and Sunni branches of Islam. Ten years later, what was referred to as the "Indian Shopping Centre" was said to be "some 34 shops built of temporary materials" and to "constitute a statutory nuisance and contravene the majority of the regulations of the Township Ordinance".⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Medical Officer of Health on Sanitation, in Annual Report, 1926.

⁵⁵ Annual Report, 1939, DC/MRU/2/9/2.

⁵⁶ D.C. to the Provincial Commissioner, Nyeri, 12th February, 1949 in DC/MRU/2/9/2.

However, it was not until 1954 that the Bazaar was moved to the new site. For our purpose, these developments had a significant effect on the Muslim community: the sectarian mosques of the Ismailis and the Ahmadis were not rebuilt in the new township site, with the result that the influence of these groups gradually dissipated. During my enquiry, I was told that there is no Ahmadiyya family in Meru now, most of them having moved to Nairobi during the mid 1950s; while a few others who lingered on, left during the country-wide Indian exodus of the early 1970s.⁵⁷ Two Ismaili families are still there but I was unable to get any information about their relationship with the Sunnis, that is whether, in the absence of an Ismaili mosque (*Jamatkhana*) they pray in the Sunni Jamia mosque, or any other of the five mosques in the Meru municipality.

From 'N.F.D. Ridge' to Nubian Village

As it was said in the introduction, it is necessary to describe and define the groups that not only came to form the Muslim settlements in the town, but also became, and remained, the nucleus of the Muslim influence in Meru. I describe these 'villages' in the order in which they were formed; in this section, therefore, we shall recapitulate the formation of the K.A.R. cantonments and operations in Meru, as they are inextricably linked with the formation of the "Nubian village"; the emergence of the Nubian Muslim community, and its subsequent development.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ For information on the Asian exodus from Kenya, see B. P. Mehta 1978:335-389.

⁵⁸ Military and civil administration in East and Central Africa were synonymous during the early days of the British rule. The result of this link between the military and civil administration was the development of a system in "which the military officer played a special part in the extension and development of British rule in the territories..." H. C. Moyse-Bartlett, (1956:xvii).

In November 1897, Sir Arthur Hardage (the Commissioner for British East African Protectorate, 1895-1900) reported that his forces comprised 250 Sudanese, 368 Swahili, 298 Indians, 16 Arabs, and 191 Somalis - a total of 1120 men⁵⁹. Again the Swahili group was always a mixture of people from different ethnic backgrounds which included Wanyamwezi, Manyema, among others who had been converted to Islam and Swahilized. From its composition, it is clear that the force was virtually Muslim - the Sudanese, Somalis and Arabs being traditionally Muslim.⁶⁰

After the headquarters of the K.A.R. were transferred to Nairobi in 1904, it was deemed that the main task of the force "lay in the supporting of the gradual extension of the administration from Nairobi towards Mt. Kenya".⁶¹ Therefore, the Embu garrison which had served in Nyeri, moved to Meru in 1908 with Edward Butler Horne. The decision to administer the Northern Frontier District (N.F.D.) was taken in 1909 due to the Somali disturbance.

With the decision in 1916 to build a road to Wajir in N.F.D., the station at Meru "automatically" became the headquarters of N.F.D. transport. An additional area of 120 acres was acquired for K.A.R., the whole area was fenced in and became known as "N.F.D. Ridge", abutting on

⁵⁹ H. C. Moyse-Bartlett, 1956:104.

⁶⁰ The establishment authorized by the government in 1898 had five Sudanese and three Swahili companies. The forces were used in the Ogaden campaign of 1901 and Jubaland expedition of 1895-1901. They were re-organized at the end of 1901 and on 1st January 1902, King's African Rifles was created, with the original forces being incorporated. As will be shown below, some of the residents of the Nubian village in Meru had served in almost all of these campaigns.

⁶¹ H. C. Moyse-Bartlett, 1956:204.

the township land. On the ridge were the supplies stores and the dispensary, now Meru hospital.⁶²

Of significance to us here is the arrival of a relatively large number of Muslims in the army. It is said that besides sharing a common identity in the army, the soldiers and their families rallied around a mosque in their cantonments, and there celebrated *maulid* and observed other religious festivals, to which other township residents were usually invited. One informant enthusiastically described the *maulidi* celebrations in the barracks as the biggest and best organized in the township at that time.⁶³

When Meru became the headquarters of N.F.D. administration, K.A.R. and police activity increased - more officers and workers were brought in and out of the district. Many workers from the neighbouring colonies also found their way into the station and fell into two distinct categories: "Nubian" and "Swahili". The generic Swahili category included all those who professed to be Muslims, regardless of whether they were Baganda drivers or Nyamwezi *askaris*.⁶⁴ As the Swahili category will be dealt with in the next chapter, it may be useful here to give a brief

⁶² See Annual Report, 1921, DC/MRU/1/1. When it was decided that N.F.D. be ruled by the military, the headquarters of 5 K.A.R. were transferred from Kismayu in present-day Somalia to Meru. Some of the descendants of Kismayu returnees are still in Salama near the hospital. For the cantonments, a site was selected on the Meru-Archer's Post road, about one-and-half miles from the township. Today the former officers' mess is part of Mwithumwiru primary school and its white-washed walls still stand in contrast to the rest of the school buildings.

⁶³ Interview with Kainda, Mjini 26th November, 1991.

⁶⁴ It has already been explained above that the K.A.R. and the police force were not comprised solely of Sudanese, there was a wide range of other communities.

background to the Nubian group that came to form the Nubian community in Meru.

Recently, the Nubians in East Africa have been the subject of a wide variety of studies, covering military slavery, migration and identity among other topics.⁶⁵ There are several versions of their history. However the one point on which the historians seem to concur is that of Nubian heterogeneity. The Equatorial Province, governed by Emin Pasha,⁶⁶ included a wide area of what is now the Sudan, the north-western part of Uganda and north-eastern Zaire. Of the original group of Emin Pasha's troops who joined Lugard in 1891, 800 were soldiers and 9000 camp followers. In the following year, this number rose to 1000 soldiers and 10,000 non-combatants⁶⁷ with the replenishment being obtained from these areas.

Kokole in his rather provocative article based on the Nubians in Uganda, argues that the Nubians in East Africa constitute a "Muslim club" whose "world is not territorial" but "religious and cultural".⁶⁸ This may be true for Uganda where the process of Nubianization has been recorded

⁶⁵ The most recent studies on the Nubians are about the Nubians in Uganda, where their social circumstances are different from what they are in Kenya.

⁶⁶ Egypt's interest in the River Nile provided the necessary impetus for her imperialist manoeuvre, and by the second half of the 19th century she had advanced, placing garrisons along the river in the region that came to be known as the Equatorial Province. Through Egypt, Britain obtained direct access in the pretext of suppressing slave trade and promoting 'legitimate' trade. The governor of Equatorial province at this time was Emin Pasha, an Austrian who had converted to Islam and taken the name Emin Pasha, Hansen (1990:320-1).

⁶⁷ D. H. Johnson, 1988:152.

⁶⁸ O. H. Kokole, 1985:433.

particularly during the reign of Idi Amin, but not for the exclusive Nubi communities of ex-servicemen and their descendants in Kenya.

The Nubian identity is essentially a complex of a cumulative Muslim cultural experience coupled with a deep regard for the value of the military service to the colonial government. During their long military career, the Nubians had built and strengthened a feeling of common identity and cohesion among individuals recruited from various ethnic, cultural and regional backgrounds. Their collective experiences prior to their arrival in Meru shaped their perception of themselves as a group:

the Nubians were subjected to strong army discipline and training, and a way of life in accordance with military standards developed. What really distinguished the military communities was their Islamic basis, which separated them from the surrounding society and helped to develop their own cultural traits".⁶⁹

The strongest tie was the military culture - the barracks constituted their social environment, with the large contingent of non-combatants providing the necessary support for the soldiers and later ex-soldiers. They felt themselves to be superior to the people among whom they settled, a feeling derived from a long association with the rulers. It is to be remembered that the K.A.R. units in which they served were used to crush stubborn communities which were reluctant to submit to the colonial authority. Thus their role in the military placed them well above the peoples they helped to subjugate.⁷⁰

The Governor's (Edward Northey) "personal" concession of land to the Nubians in Kisumu in western Kenya, set a precedent for their counterparts in Meru, who petitioned the D.C. in Meru for similar

⁶⁹ See H. B. Hansen 1990:321.

⁷⁰ For instance, they were exempted from the payment of poll tax paid by natives.



treatment. The Governor's approval of the Nubian claim and consequent occupation of residential plots rent free, was in a way an affirmation of the Nubian special status vis-a-vis other government servants. The D.C in Meru also reiterated that they were a respectable community⁷¹ deserving of government attention and support. From the outset, the conditions for their settlement on the ridge that came to be known as the Nubian village in Meru were clearly spelt out by the district administration, laying emphasis on long military service, at least 9 years.⁷²

The Governor's "personal" land concession to Nubians in Kisumu was used by the Nubians in Meru to legitimate their claim to government recognition of their 'Nubianness', and hence their 'non-nativeness'. This apparent government support filled in for the possible feeling of isolation that they might have experienced had they been thrust into the Meru society without any government support. Colonial paternalism reinforced the notion of 'Nubianness'. They could have been (numerically) outnumbered and lost their identity, but by clinging to such concepts and organizing to suit their own conditions, they were able to hold onto their separate identity. In a sense, 'Nubianness' was turned into an important social asset in the process of creating and sustaining a separate social-religious identity of a minority group. It is evident, therefore, that their settlement had a different social stance from the start; and thus they were able to cling to their separate identity for almost 40 years, during which period only the "legitimate residents"⁷³ occupied the settlement.

Initially, it was not envisaged that the N.F.D. ridge would be occupied by ex-servicemen, but as the discharged men and their families did

⁷¹ D.C. to Senior Commissioner, Nyeri, 10th September 1921, DC/MRU/2/4/10.

⁷² District Commissioner's Office, 22rd May 1930, DC/MRU/2/4/10.

⁷³ In 1946, the "legitimate residents" were defined as "only ex-police and K.A.R. Askaris who were given free plots personal to them" by the Governor. See D.C. 7/2/1946 in DC/MRU/2/4/10.

not have an alternative place, they sought permission to settle in this area which was regarded as the property of N.F.D. administration. And since the Governor (Sir Edward Northey) had approved the proposal to permit ex-K.A.R. to remain on residential plots rent-free in Kisumu, similarly the Nubians in Meru appealed to the local administration for the same conditions to be applied to them as they were also

ex-K.A.R., ex-police and ex-N.F.D. Constabulary; and in possession of certificates of long service, exempting them from payment of Hut and Poll Tax.⁷⁴

In 1921, the D.C. reported that:

a number of Nubians principally ex-N.F.D. police, are settling here and plots have been laid out on the 'N.F.D. Ridge' and allotted to them...though the proposal was supported by the C.N.C.⁷⁵

From the outset, the conditions of the occupation of the ridge were stipulated, and these came to largely determine the nature of the settlement, giving it a different social stance from the already existing Swahili village and the subsequent Majengo. As more retired officers of the N.F.D. force settled in the ridge, it became imperative for the administration to address the issue and in 1922 the Governor

...reversed his original ruling that certain Nubian ex-Askaris must pay rent for their plots. Consequently, all Nubian ex-K.A.R. & ex-N.F.D. Constabulary, discharged with a good character after not less than nine years' service are all allowed to occupy their plots rent-free. These men and also the Swahili are on the whole very law-abiding and give little trouble.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ D.C to Senior Commissioner, Nyeri, 19/9/1921, DC/MRU/2/4/14.

⁷⁵ Annual Report, 1921, DC/MRU/1/1.

⁷⁶ Annual Report, 1922, DC/MRU/1/1.

This was the beginning of what came to be known as the "Nubian Village" in Meru. Virtually all the Nubians settled in Meru had rendered long service in numerous campaigns.⁷⁷ The Government was indebted to the Nubians for their remarkable service in the establishment of colonial rule and now that the *Pax-Britanica* had been achieved, the government felt a sense of responsibility for the well-being of these ex-servicemen and their families.

It was these ex-soldiers and their descendants who formed the Nubian Muslim community on the ridge. However, their settlement on the ridge, which was then abutting on the township land, was to cause unforeseen difficulties later on when it became necessary to expand the hospital and plan the growing township. Therefore, subsequent District Annual Reports were dominated by the medical officers' condemnation of the insanitary conditions of the town in general and the Swahili and the Nubian villages in particular. The removal of the Nubian village to a new site was deemed necessary, but after examining its feasibility, the issue would be left in abeyance only to be reopened some years later.

Nevertheless, the Nubian village was never moved from the site even when it became part of the growing township. What has actually been happening is that the settlement has been shrinking to give room to the expansion of the district hospital⁷⁸. In the late 1960s or early 1970s,⁷⁹

⁷⁷ The Egyptian campaign of 1882; Jubaland 1893-1901; Ogaden 1900-1901; Nandi 1895-1897, 1905; Embu 1906; Somaliland 1908-1910; and finally in the First World War 1914-1918. Some of the discharged *Akaris* settled in British Dolo, but with the cessation of Jubaland in 1921, they returned to Meru. The list of the house owners in the Nubian village shows that some of the ex-servicemen had served the Imperial British East Africa company in the late 1880s. See file on Nubian village, DC/MRU/2/4/10.

⁷⁸ It has been said above that on the N.F.D. Ridge, when it was first occupied, were the paymaster's house and the dispensary. It is this dispensary which developed into the present Meru District Hospital.

when the medical school wing was built, the displaced Nubians were settled in Salama, a row of eleven houses just below the hospital. My Nubi informant claimed that only "pure Nubians" were settled at Salama.⁸⁰ Though it is unlikely that the question of 'purity' would be considered by the authorities, it is certain that the criteria for resettlement of the affected persons were that: they must be original owners of the plots taken up by the new hospital wing; or their direct descendants. It is these criteria that were construed as emphasis on purity of 'Nubi blood'. Today, the hospital occupies the greater part of the Ridge; with Salama and "new Swahili village" (built in 1954) on either side, with the tall wing of the hospital's training school and flats towering menacingly over the rusty tin roofs, which are now the legacy of the once thriving Muslim settlement.

Majengo

The third Muslim settlement in the town is that of the *mahaji*, pioneer Meru converts. There is evidence, as I shall illustrate below, to link the founding of Majengo (the *mahaji* settlement) in Meru, in 1926 or thereabout, with the events taking place in the African Muslim settlements in Nairobi. The Nairobi Muslim villages, having been established by porters and *Askaris*,⁸¹ provided a model for future up-country Muslim settlements, which became a familiar feature and an integral part of many towns in Kenya. The emergence of Majengo, though itself a result of the colonial policy, was seen as a "native" problem. Describing the situation in 1931, the Nyeri Provincial Commissioner lamented that:

⁷⁹ In the absence of administrative records or other records regarding the construction of the medical school, it is difficult to fix the precise dates.

⁸⁰ Interview with Zueni and Mariamu, Salama, 27th October 1991.

⁸¹ J. Bunjra (1969 *passim*) and my own study of these settlements - A. Maingi (1987:104-134) and A. Kubai (1992:33-43).

The problem of detribalised or deruralised natives is becoming acute in the vicinity of all large towns and municipalities and in Nairobi itself, the situation is now causing anxiety...there is all over Nairobi a race of detribalised^{natives} of this and neighbouring colonies who cannot be sent home... They are nearly all Mohammedans. Most of them call themselves Swahili.⁸²

The Nairobi Muslim villages were Pangani, founded by people from Tanganyika; Unguja by the Zanzibaris; Mji wa Mombasa, occupied mainly by people from Kenya's coast; and Kileleshwa with a mixture of both the Swahili and *mahaji* Muslims. It is necessary, before we proceed with the formation of Majengo in Meru, to explain who these *mahaji* were and how they themselves came into contact with Islam.

The first thing to note about the *mahaji*, is that they were individuals who had left their homes in the rural areas and travelled to distant towns. Individual *mahaji* had left their homes in different circumstances and for different reasons. From personal accounts of a number of my *mahaji* informants, it emerges that some of them went out of sheer adventure, for instance Mzee Ibrahim explains how he left his home for Nairobi, in the following interview:

When I was about sixteen years of age, even before I was circumcised, I heard from one of the warriors in my village that there was a place called Nairobi. It was said that this place was full of cars, Europeans and Asians and many other things. I was quite excited by these stories and, together with a friend of mine, we decided to travel to Nairobi. As you know, we would not be allowed to leave, so we absconded from home. After walking for more than a week, we arrived at Pangani, the African location. For some time we did not have a place to sleep, but later on we found a job with an Asian. It was difficult and soon I left to work for a Somali - my job was to herd his cattle near the present Ngara Road in Nairobi, which at this time was a bush. I became friends with some men from Tanganyika (now Tanzania) who converted me to Islam. I moved to

⁸² S. H. Fountaine, 13/3/1931, K.N.A. ADM/7/31.

stay with them in a house owned by a Nandi woman in Pangani.⁸³

For Mzee Ibrahim, it was his adventurous spirit that led to his conversion and changed his future life; but the same cannot be said of many others, whose departure from their homes was not only instigated by the colonial administration, but actually enforced through compulsory recruitment of labour.

The reasons for the reluctance to work⁸⁴ were mainly cultural; and also previous experience had shown that many of those who went out to *kiaro*,⁸⁵ as this forced labour was called, never returned - probably they died in the harsh conditions of travel and hard labour. Soon the local administrators realized that:

To talk of educating the natives up to the idea of the dignity of labour, of instilling into their minds their duty to the community in this respect, or introducing amongst them the new wants for the satisfaction of which they must obtain money by work, savours rather of the parliamentary orator at home (England) than of the practical man on the spot. The fact remains... that there is in most cases from the natives' point of view no reason whatever why he should go out to work unless compelled to do so and as soon as he

⁸³ Interview with Mzee Ibrahim, Majengo, 26th August 1991.

⁸⁴ Among the Meru people, division of labour between men and women was clearly defined, for instance men looked after the cows while the women tended the fields. Even then there were certain crops for instance yam, which were tended by men and not women. The warriors formed the defence of the land and were exempted from such labour. Therefore, when the Europeans introduced the idea of going out to work, it was difficult to fit it in the traditional pattern of work and division of labour.

⁸⁵ In Igembe there are numerous accounts of how the early Europeans captured the strong young men and forced them to become porters for the expeditions. Many of these never returned to their families, giving *kiaro* bad connotations in the minds of the Meru.

has become independent enough to refuse to go when told, compulsion... is the only remedy.⁸⁶

The administrators felt that the "only solution", therefore, was to be found in increased taxation in order to force the Meru people to go out to seek work so as to obtain money for the tax, with failure to pay leading to various kinds of punishment in the hands of the ruthless local aides to the administrators and *Askaris*. Besides the economic pressure after the introduction of "new wants and desires for the satisfaction of which they must obtain money by work", the establishment of colonial rule saw the disruption of the social system; for instance, the warriors who were usually organized around the Meru traditional barracks, from where they handled the defence matters of their country, were now redundant. The result was the tendency of some of the young men to go out of the district in search of a new life.

Others were conscripted into the army and the police force.⁸⁷ While in the army, some of the soldiers found it necessary to convert because they were treated with veiled repugnance by soldiers drawn from communities which were traditionally Muslim,⁸⁸ for instance, eating together with non-Muslim (and therefore *washenzi* or uncultured) colleagues, was deemed unacceptable by many believing soldiers.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ See Annual Report 1912, DC/MRU/1/1.

⁸⁷ The role of K.A.R. has been discussed before, but the recruitment of the Meru did not take place until the beginning of the First World War. Some of the mahaji who converted in the army are: Abdi Murungi, Abdallah Tumbo, Abdi Shangishu, and M'Laibuni.

⁸⁸ I have shown in my analysis of the composition of the K.A.R that the force was virtually Muslim.

⁸⁹ The Rev. J. N. Mruka, (1974) in his study of the Sunni Muslim community in Kisumu in western Kenya, observed that "senior askaris treated new recruits with contempt and like the Arabs referred to them as

It was these men and others who had, through the army and other factors that have been outlined above, found their way into the Nairobi African ("Native") locations, who now returned as *mahaji* to establish the Majengo in Meru in 1926 or thereabout. The reasons why they could not return to their rural places of origin form part of the reaction of the Meru to the presence of Muslims in their midst. These reasons will be discussed in detail in the next chapter, therefore, here we shall only allude to some of the most important ones.

While in the Nairobi African locations of Pangani, Mji wa Mombasa, Kileleshwa, and later Pumwani, all of which were predominantly Muslim, some of these people came into contact with Islam, and their lives were influenced by the religious, political and social life in these places. For instance, under the leadership of the leading non-coastal Kikuyu Muslim scholar Maalim (Haji) Hamisi, they had become aware of the tension existing between the coastal Muslims and the *mahaji* in Pangani.⁹⁰

When Mji wa Mombasa was demolished in 1922, the bulk of its residents moved to Pumwani, then the new "Native Location." However, this demolition did not provide a signal to the Meru *mahaji* that sooner or later they would have to return home; they found alternative accommodation in the remaining Pangani and Kileleshwa. But four years later, Kileleshwa was also demolished and it was best thought that its residents should be urged to return to their original homes. Consequently, in 1927 those who wished to return to their rural homes in different parts

kafiri or washenzi. In some cases the old askaris did not have much to do with the new recruits at the times of meals. They refused to eat with kafiris" (p.47).

⁹⁰ A. Kubai 1992:39-40.

of Kenya were given three months to accept the offer of free tickets.⁹¹ Though the list of Kileleshwa house owners shows only one Meru house owner,⁹² there were Meru tenants in many other houses, as a number of pioneer *mahaji* in Majengo and Mjini claim to have lived in Kileleshwa at that time.

The effects of the demolition of the African villages in Nairobi were far reaching and the Meru *mahaji* elected to return home. They were joined by others from other towns who realized that repatriation was inevitable, owing to the colonial desire to curb the growth of African population in towns.⁹³ In these apparently inevitable circumstances, individual *mahaji* returned to Meru. It is worthwhile to note that they did not move as an organized group. On arrival, each individual tried to find a place, with the first target being the Swahili village, since, as has been shown above, the Nubian village on the Ridge was officially designated for ex-servicemen.

Soon it was realized that the returning *mahaji* needed their own place. A group of about 30 men⁹⁴ were now united by a common purpose

⁹¹ Deputy Governor of Kenya to the Secretary of State for Colonies, 11th August, 1936 on "Clearance of Pangani Village", CO 533/462/8, Public Records Office, London.

⁹² Mzee Hamisi (interview 27th November 1991, Mjini) told me that he was converted while in Kileleshwa and owned the only Meru-owned house that is mentioned in the Kileleshwa Files, K.N.A. PC/CP 9/15/3.

⁹³ The colonial attitude towards the growth of African population in towns is summed up by the Nyeri P.C., see above footnote 54.

⁹⁴ Some of the pioneer *mahaji* were Mohammed Kamari who had been converted at Thika; Bilal from Igembe; Maalim Asuman; Ali Mbetera, converted in Kiambu, Umari from Ng'onyi but converted in Embu, Umari Nkingo who moved to Mutuati later on, Simba from Tharaka, Abdallah Kamau Memba, from Kianjai, converted in Nairobi, Ramdhan Nkiiri, Ali Kalasinga, a Kikuyu, Umari Mukatheri, Salim Matumbu, Hassan Kamushari, Salim Ngundu, Juma Tinge, Mzee Umar Mulingoti, Abdi

- the need to establish their settlement, their own Majengo. While in Nairobi and especially in Pangani village, they had witnessed the struggle between the Swahili and the converts.⁹⁵ They now became even more conscious of their *mahaji* identity which, they had to safeguard even in their own home district. They realized that the putative 'superiority' of those "born in the faith"⁹⁶ over the converts was not altered - they were subjected to the same disdain by the Swahili as they had been at Pangani. To the Swahili in Meru, they could be nearly as bad as *washenzi*, but were they going to be relegated to an inferior position and subjected to the coastal Swahili disdain even among their own people, above whom they have been elevated by conversion to Islam?⁹⁷ The relationship between the two groups is dealt with in the next chapter.

Similarly, they would not be absorbed in the Nubian village for a number of reasons: First, the "legitimate residents are only the ex-police and K.A.R. askaris..."⁹⁸ Second, the Nubians prided themselves in their association with the government, an aspect to which we can attribute their contempt for both the Swahili and the *mahaji*. Third, was the question of space. By the time the *mahaji* arrived, the resultant problems of the settlement of Nubians on the ridge were becoming manifest to the

M'Kiambati, Hamisi Ngozi, Osman M'Mwarania, Saidi Kiundu, Ali M'Ibuuri, Hamisi M'Mwongo, Hamza, Ali M'Ing'entu, Salim M'Athuu, and Mzee Twa. Interview with Mzee Ibrahim (one of the pioneer *mahaji*), Halima Majengo, 26th August 1991.

⁹⁵ See A. Kubai (1992:40).

⁹⁶ A fuller discussion on the notion of superiority of those born in the faith over the converts is given in chapter 2, pp.81-89.

⁹⁷ Interview with Mzee Ibrahim, Majengo, 26th August 1991.

⁹⁸ D.C. Meru to Provincial Commissioner, Nyeri, 7th February 1946, DC/MRU/2/4/10.

administration, and therefore it was not feasible to accommodate the *mahaji* there.

The next alternative open to the administration was to return the *mahaji* to their rural villages of origin, but that option was not viable: first, the views of the Secretary of State for Colonies (S.S.C.) with regard to the removal of Muslims from Nairobi, were well known to the local administration - there were those whom the government considered "to be not detribalised but who do not wish to go to the reserve", to whom an option was given. The S.S.C. therefore advised that arrangements be made "to permit such families to continue to live in accustomed social and religious association".⁹⁹

There was an obligation on the part of the government to settle the dispossessed individuals, though the governor's ambivalence towards the *mahaji* is apparent in the comparison that he makes in the following reply to the S.S.C.'s queries concerning their welfare:

3. The nucleus of the inhabitants are old men and widows, strict Muslims according to their lights, detribalized, deruralised...the majority came originally from the coast and from neighbouring territories... For them I have sympathy and respect...

5. Round this respectable nucleus have gathered in later years natives from local reserves, who live by their wits and on their fellows...Most have assumed the veneer of Islam but the tenuity of this can be judged from their addiction to illicit brewing and drunkenness...They are neither detribalized nor completely deruralized...For such I have no sympathy...The problem of their settlement is difficult...

6. There is, however, provision for the deruralized in the trading centres in reserves and in the townships where there already exist

⁹⁹ See CO 533/462/8, Public Records Office, London.

Muslim communities with their mosques and other social and religious amenities".¹⁰⁰

Second, the *mahaji* themselves were reluctant to return to the rural areas. There are several plausible explanations for this: first, they had acquired a distinctively urban, in other words, Swahili lifestyle which was fundamentally incompatible with that of the rural traditional villages. They had also internalized Swahili-Islamic religious and cultural values which now set them apart from their non-Muslim relatives, making it difficult for them to be integrated into the traditional social system. It was difficult for such people to go back to the mainstream of the traditional society and its ways, a great deal of which they had tried to abandon as a result of their conversion.¹⁰¹

Third, has been shown in the case of Ibrahim above, some of these pioneer *Mahaji* had absconded from their homes. For such individuals, the conditions in which they had left their homes many years before now made it difficult for them to be re-absorbed into their families. Some of them had maintained little or no connection with their places of origin and hence for them, it was expedient to settle in or near a township.

Fourth, there was a marked sense of insecurity among the returning *mahaji*, compelling them to live together in what the S.S.C. termed accustomed social and religious association.¹⁰² The idea of an individual Muslim surrounded by non-believing neighbours to whom s/he could not extend the customary *majengo* habits of visiting and exchanging

¹⁰⁰ The Governor of Kenya to the S.S.C., 29th August 1936. CO 533/462/8.

¹⁰¹ This point can be illustrated by the case of M'Ibuuri in chapter 6 (pp. 262-263). Also see the dilemma caused by the need to lift the Njia curse in chapter 2, pp.111-114.

¹⁰² CO 533/462/8.

information in neighbours' houses and the calendrical religious festivals which are cherished by all, was clearly unattractive to the *mahaji*.¹⁰³ It was in these circumstances that the first band of *mahaji* set out to find a settlement in Meru. At first, the administration offered them a site some eight miles from the town, but they rejected the offer because the place was isolated from any trade centre and also prone to attack by the Dorobo. Besides, there was no reliable source of water. They attempted to settle at Gakoromone, then adjacent to the township land, but they were soon thrown out by the owners of the land.¹⁰⁴ At this time, the Meru had not come to terms with the idea of selling land, and exclusive individual rights or possession of it were still unthinkable. As one colonial administrator observed, though he failed to grasp the significance of the role of the clan in matters of land and therefore distorted and misrepresented the idea,

The **mwiriga** (clan) is the land owner. The land belongs to the tribe in general, but it is parcelled out among the *mwiriga* and the *mwiriga* divides it amongst its members. No individual can alienate land. In the case of alienation of land to non-natives, the *kiama* (executive council of elders) would have the deciding voice.¹⁰⁵

Furthermore he noted that the clan ownership of the land embraced "a conception of land tenure to which the European notions of absolute ownership are quite foreign".¹⁰⁶ Therefore, when an ex-askari named M'Kirika 'sold' the site on which Majengo now stands to the *mahaji*, the clan abrogated the sale. As an individual, he did not have the mandate to do this, the decision lay with the council of elders of the clan. The district administrator acknowledged that "the elders of these bodies have

¹⁰³ Interview with Mzee Ibrahim, Majengo, 26th October 1991.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Halima and Nyanya, Majengo, 26th August 1991.

¹⁰⁵ Annual Report, 1912-13, DC/MRU/1/1.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

supernatural powers and are empowered to lay a curse on people and things".¹⁰⁷ The duality of the role of the clan is described by Fadiman thus:

To its members a clan consisted of the living and their ancestors. It "lived," therefore, within not just the temporal world, but an interrelated spiritual sphere as well. Reflecting this duality, the councils existed within both secular and supernatural contexts.

Being aware of the role of the clan in the society: the implication of its verdict on social issues; and the efficacy of its curses, if it became necessary to resort to this ultimate measure, the *mahaji* sued for peace.¹⁰⁸ By invoking the principle of impartiality enshrined in the law of the land, which entitled them to fair treatment in spite of the fact that they had "become Muslim", and consequently lost their place in the traditional society, the *mahaji* appealed to the particular clan which had jurisdiction over the area in question.¹⁰⁹ Finally, they acquired the piece of land, then outside the precincts of the township on the other side of Kathita river where Majengo stands today.¹¹⁰

The first 20 houses were built within a relatively short time, and the population began to increase as more *mahaji* poured in after the demolition

¹⁰⁷ Dobb's report, 1920 cited in 1927 Annual Report, DC/MRU/1/1. Also see LAMB 1/5/6. The efficacy of curse is illustrated by the Njia case in chapter 2, pp. 111-114.

¹⁰⁸ Mzee Salim (Interview) described in detail how the *mahaji* appeased the elders by paying the required 'legal fees', that is honey beer and a goat for the elders to consider their case.

¹⁰⁹ The Meru judicial system stresses the principle of equality before the law. For information on the Meru judicial system, see A. M. M'Imanyara (1993:84).

¹¹⁰ Interview with Mzee Hamza, Majengo 3rd August 1991.

of Pangani. It was not long before the village, which by this time was outside the precincts of the township, assumed a distinctive Majengo character, not too different from the other two earlier settlements, the Nubian and the Swahili.

Trade Centres

The presence of the Muslim elements scattered in the small trade centres in other parts of the district also needs to be explained. The first trade centre to be opened was Maua in 1910 and gazetted on 21/11/1911; then Njangwa (Tharaka) in 1912, Muthara in 1913, Igoji and Kirieni in 1915. By the end of 1915, it was reported that

All these centres have proved an unqualified success, they are used by comparatively large number of Indians and Swahilis and opening of a new centre has always been succeeded by an increase in the volume of trade in the district.¹¹¹

This trend continued and by 1926, seven more trade centres had been opened. In these centres most of the pioneer commercial plot owners at this time, are foreigners: Indians, Arabs, and Swahili. There was also a relatively large number of Muslims from Ethiopia, popularly known as Abashi in most of the trade centres. Mutuati, which was opened in 1927, became the centre of Abashi activity in Igembe, many of them having somewhat established themselves and built a mosque at Kabachi, approximately three miles from Mutuati (Tamani). At this time there was a flourishing trade between Igembe and Garba Tulla and consequently most of the Abashi could come down from Marsabit. But in 1939, probably due

¹¹¹ Annual Report, 1915-1916. It is also to be remembered that all the Swahili and most of the Indians in the trade centres were Muslim.

to the on-going Second World War, Mutuati was closed. The D.C. reports that:

Mutuati ceased to be a Trade Centre at the end of the year but there still remained the difficulty of finding residence and subsistence for a number of the Abyssinians there. They have been in the country for many years but rarely pay anything in the way of rents or taxes if they can possibly avoid it.¹¹²

It is not clear how this problem was solved by the administration, but all the Abashi were removed from Mutuati, only to reestablish themselves in other centres.¹¹³ Their mosque was demolished and the materials were taken to Lare, another trade centre. There they were used for the construction of the Mosque which was completed in the following year, 1940.¹¹⁴ For many years, this remained the only public mosque in Igembe, with the annual *maulid* celebrations being held there, usually under the leadership of N.F.D. sheikhs. But as we shall see in chapter five, the recent increase in Muslim activity in the area has resulted in the construction of a number of new mosques in Igembe in the last fifteen years.

Chuka is another centre with a significant Muslim population, therefore it is necessary to give its historical background. Writing on the history of the district in 1925, the District Commissioner, D.R. Crampton reported that Chuka first came under nominal colonial control in 1907 when Edward Butler Horne, after crushing the Embu resistance, opened a station there. In his explanation for tighter control of the area and its people, he said that "the size of the district and the wild nature of the people

¹¹² Annual Report, 1939, DC/MRU/1/4.

¹¹³ My informants say that the Abashi were dealing illegally in arms with Ethiopia, and that is why they were moved and dispersed to other trade centres in Igembe. See Annual Report, 1939, DC/MRU/1/4.

¹¹⁴ Interview with Sheikh Ibrahim, Kiengu mosque, 28th August 1991.

necessitated most of the work close to the station".¹¹⁵ Therefore, the outlying Chuka area would not be effectively controlled from Embu.¹¹⁶ The Chuka people were said to be rather stubborn, though "some real control" was achieved in 1910. During the following year "considerable progress is made", and in 1912 a road was cut through Chuka country. In 1913, it was decided to make Chuka a sub-district and the site known as Katumbi was selected for the new station, with Mr Orde-Brown as the A.D.C. in charge. It seems that the same procedure as that of opening up the *boma* in Meru was applied to Chuka:

The work on the station was undertaken on June 8th. Mr.Orde-Brown arriving at the site with all the necessary loads on that date. Work was at once began on the police and Tribal Retainers lines...¹¹⁷

For our purpose, it is important to note that the administrator arrived with all the necessary paraphernalia of a *boma*. Of particular significance were the police lines, which, together with the porters' lines of the accompanying porters and other servants, all of whom were generically referred to as Swahili, were located on the present site of the Catholic church. In comparison to the *boma* in Meru, Chuka was a small station, and therefore the Swahili settlement was much smaller than any of the three in Meru *boma*.

Soon the Swahili men took local wives, and a few Chuka individuals were converted to Islam. These are joined by a number of pioneer Chuka families who had been converted in Embu.¹¹⁸ The Swahili were the usual

¹¹⁵ Meru Political Recordbook, 1908-24, DC/MRU/4/4.

¹¹⁶ Chuka Political Recordbook, 1925-1957, DC/MRU/4/5.

¹¹⁷ Chuka Political Recordbook, 1925-1957, DC/MRU/4/5.

¹¹⁸ Some of these were Omari Kagunda, Almas Njeru, whose sister was married to an Asian, Omari Idd (from Kanyakine not Chuka), Abdallah

mixture of people from diverse places, for instance, Kirugua who assumed the leadership of the Muslim community, is said to be of Tanganyika (Tanzanian) origin. He became the Imam of the mosque in the station and also served as the teacher, and even performed the duties of a *qadhi* as he conducted marriages between his fellow Muslim men and local women.

The station proved to be a flourishing trade centre, many traders settled there and married the local women. Some of the traders left their wives and travelled to Tharaka, which explains why the traders in Tharaka were said to be "somewhat migratory".¹¹⁹ This migratory nature could be attributed to aridity of Tharaka region, which, perhaps, hampered the development of trade centres, with the result that no Muslim communities were established there.

Chuka station was closed in 1928 or thereabout, and its residents divided between Meru and Embu stations. The *askaris* were moved to Meru and the majority of the other Muslims preferred to go to Embu. After all, most of them had been converted there, and therefore it would be easier for them to rejoin their godfathers than to start life afresh in Meru *boma*, where they would be strangers, and would probably get caught in the rivalry between the Muslim groups.

When the station reopened in 1941, a number of Muslims returned to Chuka and first "squatted", as one of these returnees put it, at Ndagani,

Saidi (converted in Chuka), Ali Ntaru (he had ran away from home to Embu from where he went to Pangani in Nairobi), Ali Kaume, Mohammed M'Arindiri, Hamisi Kathuu (a Kikuyu), and Mohammed Kathanju. Interview, Joel M'Ikangi, Chuka, 23rd November 1991; and interview with Mariam, Mjini, 26th November 1991.

¹¹⁹ Annual Report, 1912-13 DC/MRU/1/1.

a mile from the present Chuka township.¹²⁰ Later on, they obtained a piece of land from Thwagira clan, on the site that is now known as "Kwa Swairi", the place of the Swahili.¹²¹ The question that comes to mind is why this failure if religion, as Peil suggests, "can be very useful in holding together a group of people"?¹²² When I posed this question to one of the pioneer Chuka Muslims, he attributed the failure of Chuka Muslims to establish a Majengo in spite of the presence of a sizeable group of Muslims living there, to two factors: first he explained that the pioneer Chuka Muslims had not been fully integrated into the Swahili-Islamic culture when they returned during the Second World War, for if they had been, they would have established themselves at Ndagani where they first squatted when they returned. But their newly acquired religious values, which, after all, had not become deeply ingrained, were somewhat diluted; and therefore, when it became necessary for them to settle in one place as members of Muslim a community, it was difficult for them to forge unity.¹²³ Seen in this light, it can be said that unlike the *mahaji* in Meru town, the absence of the fundamental network of roles involving interaction between individual members, which gives a Muslim group its distinctive qualities, hampered the construction of a viable Muslim community in Chuka.

¹²⁰ Note that Chuka has recently been elevated to township status. In 1992 Meru district was divided into two districts: Tharaka-Nithi, with the headquarters in Chuka; Meru; and Maua Sub-district with the headquarters in Maua. Prior to this Chuka has been a trade centre.

¹²¹ The Imam of Chuka mosque, to whom I am grateful for this information, explained that the clan was infuriated when a pioneer Muslim convert, Omar Kagunda, who had been converted in Nairobi offered a piece of land to the Muslims.

¹²² M. Peil, 1977:218.

¹²³ Interview with Almas, Chuka 23rd November 1991.

The second factor is the hostility of the majority of the Chuka people towards their kinsmen who had converted to Islam. This hostility, he said, is manifest in the long standing dispute between the local council (perhaps because the council nowadays has replaced clan in matters of land ownership) and the Muslims over the ownership of the piece of land in question. However, in 1981, it was decided that, in spite of the legal tussle, the construction of the new mosque should commence. But no sooner had the construction began than the council invaded the site and bulldozed the foundations of the mosque. With the help from some prominent Muslims in Meru town, a strong deputation sought the intervention of the relevant authorities of the local government. The council was ordered to restore the foundations of the mosque and pay compensation to the Muslims. Notwithstanding the order, the council neither paid the compensation nor restored the demolished foundations. The matter was left in abeyance for quite some time. But with external donations through the Islamic Foundation, the Muslims managed to put up a magnificent mosque that now overlooks the desolated Kwa Swairi (the place of the Swahili). Thus the spatial and consequently the social development of a Majengo in Chuka has been hampered by numerous factors, and when one looks at the so-called "place of the Swahili", except for the magnificent white-washed mosque with its tall minarets dominating the scene, the few thatch-and-mud houses scattered haphazardly in the midst of banana trees, clearly show little semblance to the Majengo communalism that is typical of Muslim settlements in urban centres.

Conclusion

Muslim presence in Meru is a direct result of the establishment of the colonial administration there. Prior to the arrival of the British administrator, Edward Butler Horne and his men in 1908, the Meru people were living quietly on the slopes of Mount Kenya as they had done for centuries. As has been said, those accompanying Mr. Horne, that is the

K.A.R. company, the police and porters, were largely Muslim. People from diverse backgrounds constituted the heterogeneous group that came to identify itself as the Swahili in Meru. The settlement of the various groups in different parts of then embryonic station came to reinforce the notion of separate identity for each group. The arrival of the *mahaji* from Nairobi and other towns and the establishment of their settlement outside the town precincts in what is now Majengo added a new dimension to the intra-Muslim relations in the station, it now became a Muslim triad: the Swahili, Nubian and *mahaji*. These groups formed the nucleus Muslim communities in Meru. The Indians in their bazaar formed another group, but due to the racial segregation obtaining at that time there was little interaction between them and the Africans.

The trade centres proved a big success for trade in the district and the role of the Asians in spreading Islam to these centres cannot be overlooked. Some of the Asian traders based in the township set up businesses in the trade centres, for instance, Mohammed Moti opened a *posho* mill in Maua. He was also permitted to open a shop at Chuka, even before the station was gazetted as a trade centre in 1913. It is reported that, besides meeting the needs of the residents of the station, his shop attracted the Chuka people and soon a promising trade sprung up. Some of the Asians who settled in these trade centres were Muslim. They were joined by a few other foreigners, especially the Abashi, people from Ethiopia who were Muslim.

These foreigners and their families remained the only pioneer Muslims in the centres until they were joined by a few indigenous people, especially traders who acquired plots and settled in the trade centres with their families. At this time, there was virtually no Muslim family outside the trade centres, thus living up to the Islamic reputation of being an urban religion until the early 1970s.

CHAPTER TWO

THE APPROPRIATION OF ISLAM IN MERU: *DINI* VERSUS *USHENZI*

Introduction

By late 1920s, the three African Muslim groups,¹ that is the Swahili, the Nubians and the *mahaji* or converts, were well established in separate quarters in and around the Meru township. Symbolically, the Nubians occupied the higher ground on the ridge abutting the township on the eastern side; the Swahili were at the centre; while the *mahaji* were perched on the opposite western ridge, outside the township boundary.

Islam and 'Swahiliness' are synonymous in the minds of most people living far in the interior of Kenya. Thus, the presence of the Muslim group that identified itself as 'Swahili', and the converts who identified themselves as *mahaji* vis-a-vis the Swahili group in Meru, has to be seen against the coastal background, that is the underlying ideas and concepts associated with being a *Mswahili*. It is the process of transposing the Swahili coastal ideals of 'urbanity' and 'civilization', albeit in a 'fossilized' form, that tempered the local representations of Islam far away from its traditional abode at the coast.

'Swahiliness' and Swahilization constitute a vast topic. While caution will be taken not to get entangled in the maze of information on this issue created both by historians and by anthropologists of the Swahili culture,

¹ The Asians in the Bazaar constitute another group, but due to the racial segregation and disharmony at this time, there was very little in the way of interaction between the Asian Muslims and the African Muslims. Though the Sunni Asians prayed in the Swahili mosque, they kept racial boundaries clear. Ahmadis and Ismailis maintained their sectarian mosques.

reference will be made to it here in so far as it is relevant to the study of Muslim presence and representations of Islam in Meru. It is necessary first to define the underlying coastal notions of 'urbanity' and 'civilization' in order to understand the nature of the Swahilizing/Islamizing influence in Meru.

Explaining *Ungwana* and *Ushenzi*

The classic view that the East African coastal settlements were established by Arab and Persian colonists, with the result of a dominant Middle-Eastern culture, is changing drastically as more evidence is being discovered which suggests that Islam was "grafted onto the local"² cultural milieu of the East African coastal towns. Whatever the truth, the coastal society, as Bergman observes, has functioned over the centuries through "a sort of coastal meta-cosmology" whose "key oppositional dyads... are *ustaarabu/nyika* (Arabness/civilization and town/bush), Muslim/*mshenzi* (pagan or savage), *waungwana/watume* (freemen/slaves)".³ This coastal meta-cosmology is brought to bear upon the nature of Islam that is introduced in Meru. Therefore, a brief historical background to these "oppositional dyads" is a necessary preamble to the discussion on the nature of Muslim influence in Meru.

El-Zein traces the genesis of the concept of *ungwana* to the earliest Lamu inhabitants who were divided into the 'more free', 'less free' and slave categories.⁴ With the emergence of various strata in the traditional Lamu

² J. de V. Allen, 1980:314.

³ J. Bergman, 1988:3.

⁴ Social stratification on the coast is well covered in the literature, for instance, A. H. M. El-Zein (1974:19-42) examines the origins of the different groups in Lamu, traces the development of social stratification and describes the division of the early Lamu society into various strata. F. Constantin (1989) and A. I. Salim (1976) have also dealt with the stratification of the coastal society.

society, the control of education by a certain class of people and the marriage rules provided the means of creating and sustaining an elaborate social stratification. Ideologically, the *waungwana* system was based on the concept of *hishima*, which according to El-Zein, "is not only respect, or even honour; it also involves *the maintenance of the position in which respect or honour is due*" (his emphasis).⁵ To protect one's *hishima* was of prime importance to *waungwana*. Marriage between equals provided the necessary protection for the principles of *hishima*.

Furthermore, "a person's position in this stratificatory system was determined by the category to which he belonged".⁶ Birth determined a person's position and occupation and place of residence. People of higher categories were expected to observe *heshima*, that is respect, honor and status, by behaving in accordance with the society's expectations of them as members of *waungwana* class. Similarly, people of low strata had to observe the behaviour expected of those within the boundaries of their particular stratum. *Waungwana* had to keep a distance from the lower classes. As a result the slaves who were treated as 'uncivilized' 'bush people' lived in mud houses on the farmlands where they worked on the mainland while the *waungwana* lived in stone houses in the town. The town was the centre of civilization and its inhabitants, the *waungwana* were the civilized, as opposed to the 'uncivilized' non-*waungwana*, *washenzi*.⁷

The most important feature of the coastal settlements, at least in the eyes of their occupants was precisely the nature of their urbanity. A sort of spectrum was rapidly established, extending from the longest established groups in any settlement to the complete rural-dwellers, the former were seen as 'civilized', 'urbane'; while the latter were 'uncouth', 'country bumpkins', 'savages'. The two Swahili terms

⁵ A. H. M. El-Zein, 1974:62.

⁶ Ibid., p.62.

⁷ Ibid., p.65.

expressing these concepts are respectively *u-ungwana* and *ushenzi*.⁸

It is worthwhile quoting Allen at some length on this issue since he has paid more attention to the origin of the coastal social differentiation than any other scholar.⁹ The situation that arose is vividly captured by him thus:

A contradiction inevitably grew up between newcomers and those who had founded the settlements or had lived there long enough to lose all traces of their former cultural identity...¹⁰

This process became cyclic and in the long term, over several generations the non-*waungwana*

too would become long established town residents and would begin to resent the *washenzi* of the still more recent arrivals and to side with the *waungwana* against them. And when the chance came... these same people could seldom resist the temptation to take it and so became *waungwana* themselves, thereby perpetuating not only most of the older values, but also the very concept of *u-ungwana*.¹¹

⁸ J. de V. Allen, 1980:316.

⁹ The Swahili culture and language is one of the most extensively studied aspects of East African history. J. de V. Allen has written extensively on the concept of urbanity and civilization, among other aspects of the Swahili society, see J. de V. Allen (1973) "Swahili Culture Reconsidered", "Town and Country" (1974), "Swahili Culture and Identity" (1976 b), "The Swahili House: Cultural and Ritual Concepts Underlying its Plan and Structure" (1979), "Swahili Culture and the Nature of East African Coastal Settlement" (1980) and his most recent book, *The Origins of the Swahili* (1993), published posthumously.

¹⁰ J. de V. Allen 1979:4.

¹¹ Ibid., p.4.

At the coast, town life epitomized the core of civility and urbanity (*u-ungwana*), and the 'civilized' (*waungwana*) sought to put a divide between themselves and the 'uncivilized' (*washenzi*) in every sphere: social, political and economic, though with little success in regard to the latter, owing to their inevitable dependence on the hinterland "*washenzi* whom the townsmen affected to despise" to use Allen's words. In order to sustain this divide, the *waungwana* arrogated to themselves certain rights and privileges, thus marking themselves off from the 'uncivilized' non-*waungwana* groups. They lived in a separate quarter of the town and as Allen argues, *u-ungwana* was based on the stone house culture. They used a particular mode of dress, for instance, and

by holding on to such relatively trivial points, they were able to preserve the facade of their superiority over migrant traders and others...¹²

The points which Allen considers to be trivial, were nevertheless important enough to sustain the facade of superiority of one group over another; therefore, they may not be as trivial as he suggests. As has just been said, the concepts were deep-rooted: the *washenzi* were uncultured and *ungwana*, defined as it was, in terms of stone dwellings and length of residence in towns, was cumulative, "derived from generations" and could not be otherwise acquired by the newcomers.

For many centuries therefore, Islam and *ungwana*, were intimately related. Pouwels makes a particularly important point about the relationship between Islam and *ungwana*:

'Civilization' for the period roughly before the middle of the 19th century was rendered by the word *uungwana*. This word embodied

¹² J. de V. Allen, 1980:317.

all connotations of exclusiveness about town life as well as its positive expressions...¹³

The wind of change began to blow at the beginning of the 19th century - the internal threat from the slaves and their children (*wazaliya*) who constituted another social class that undermined the fundamental *ungwana* principle of marriage only between equals, coupled with the cultural impact^{of} the Busaid Arabs,¹⁴ cracked the very core, and led to what El-Zein terms the "passing of the traditional society".¹⁵ *Waungwana* exclusivity began to peter out. But the old concepts of 'civilization' and urbanity as defined by *Waungwana* did not die out; in a sense, they became 'fossilized'. Even after the abolition of slavery in 1907 and the manumission of slaves, the ideology of social differentiation remained unchanged.¹⁶

The essence of the perceived differences between the coastal dwellers and the communities of the interior is aptly summed up by Janmohamed:

The people of the littoral could easily perceive the contrast between themselves and the indigenous population of the hinterland: while they themselves possessed a universalistic faith with a book, a literary tradition and an urban civilization, the people of the interior were seen as possessing none of these characteristics. In the eyes of a people also deeply embedded in the system of slavery, these people naturally appeared somewhat inferior...¹⁷

¹³ R. L. Pouwels, 1987:72.

¹⁴ As the Arab Busaid dynasty in Zanzibar began to exert a cultural as well as a political impact upon the coastal society after the mid 19th century, coastal civilization and Arabness, *ustaarabu*, became associated.

¹⁵ See A. H. M. El-Zein, 1974:45-101.

¹⁶ F. Constantin (1989:149) notes that the ideological representations of slavery and other forms of discrimination "were not immediately eradicated from individual minds, collective beliefs and daily attitudes".

¹⁷ K. K. Janmohamed, 1976:195.

As the contact between the coastal peoples and the interior increased in the late 19th century and early 20th century, these ideas found their way into the interior, where the emerging communities in the new administrative centres "adopted a recognizably Swahili" character. The cyclic process that Allen describes above, was first replicated in the relationship between the groups that identified themselves as the 'Swahili' and the pioneer local converts, or *mahaji* as they came to be known, in such administrative (later urban) centres as Meru.

Reinventing Ungwana in Meru

As has been said above, the coastal social setup was built upon the institution of slavery where the distinctions between the free-born (*Waungwana*) and the unfree members of the society were given prominence in the arena of social interaction. But the group that initially identified itself as 'Swahili' in Meru transmuted these concepts in the new social environment, radically different from that at the coast. The irony, as will be illustrated below, is that most of these people who tried to re-enact the coastal social stratification, a stratification largely based on slavery, were, to use Janmohamed's words, "the people of the interior", who possessed "none of these characteristics"¹⁸ that constituted the core of coastal urbanity. They were not *waungwana*, they were not the descendants of the progenitors of Lamu that El-Zein describes in his analysis of the traditional Lamu society.¹⁹ They were, as the house-owners figure given below illustrate, Wanyamwezi, Wasukuma, Manyema and others "from more distant places"²⁰ who had been added to the list of Swahilized peoples, individuals whom the *real waungwana* of the coast were loath to accept as anything better than 'uncivilized', or to quote Allen yet again, whom they

¹⁸ K. K. Janmohamed, 1976:195.

¹⁹ A. H. M. El-Zein, 1974:19-33.

²⁰ A. I. Salim, 1985:216.

"affected to despise", who now posed as the *waungwana* of Meru. Some of these from west of Lake Tanganyika, as Hobley informs us,

had filtered down to the coast with returning caravans; the majority however, having first been enslaved and then embracing the doctrine of Islam, had lost all connection with their particular tribe.²¹

Also after the abolition of slavery, some of the freed slaves sought employment in European farms, and the Uganda railway. They also found jobs as porters, *askaris*, clerks and servants.²² A good example of these were a number of people (*Wangaziya*) who traced their origins to the Comoro Islands in the Indian Ocean. At the coast, though they had embraced Islam and many of the knew the Quran well, they were kept in servitude by the *wangwana*.²³ When they came to Meru as servants of the colonial administration, they projected themselves as second only to Europeans, and treated the *mahaji* with as much disdain as they did non-Muslims.²⁴

Evidence for the diversity of the people that constituted the Swahili group in Meru is borne out by a rough listing²⁵ of the house owners in what came to be known as the "Swahili village" in the growing township:

Comorians 31%	Abash 6.9%	Manyema 6.9%
Nyamwezi 10%	Arab 3%	Others 44%

²¹ C. Hobley, 1928:187.

²² R. L. Pouwels, 1987:194.

²³ A. H. M. El-Zein, 1974:28-30.

²⁴ Interview with Mzee Ibrahim, Majengo, 26th August 1991.

²⁵ I have computed the percentages from a list of house owners in the file on Nubian village, DC/MRU/2/4/10.

The list of house owners says little about the composition of the resident population of the Swahili village. Nonetheless, the figures of house ownership suggest that only a small proportion of the house owners could trace their origins to the coastal Swahili society. Thus the identity of the Swahili was not the product of a single culture, but of the interweaving of many traditions. Nzibo put his finger on this fusion of cultures:

many tribal rites and traditions passed for Islamic rites and traditions of coastal Muslims especially those from Tanganyika passed for Islamic practices. Many upcountry mahaji adopted these rites and customs in the mistaken belief that they were Islamic, and therefore much of what was passed to them were cultural beliefs of the Wadigo, Wanyamwezi and Wamanyema, etc.²⁶

However, implicit in his argument, is the assumption that this process of codification of diverse traditions into the Swahili culture is unislamic. The crudity of this rather antiquated notion of syncretism in African Islam should be acknowledged. He echoes the classic view that Islam was 'accommodated' or 'accommodated itself' in African cultures. He disregards the fact that the process of Islamization in Africa is two-way: the Islamization of the practices of the people that adopt Islam; and the practical indigenization of Islam in the ensuing cultural interaction. What is and what is not perceived as Islamic is relative and varies from time to time, and society to society, dependent upon the mode of this interaction.

Sanneh in his illuminating article on the domestication of Islam, argues that, contrary to the view that the Islamization of African peoples hinged on the "flexibility" and "adaptive power" of Islam, "traditional Africa sustained the Muslim impact by investing the new religion with its own identity, not by yielding to it".²⁷ This phenomenon is well illustrated by the process of codification and reification of the 'Swahili Islam' in East Africa.

²⁶ Y. A. Nzibo, 1986:121.

²⁷ L. Sanneh, 1980:2.

This may help to explain the lack of a precise answer to the intriguing question of 'who is a Mswahili'. The process of Swahilization continues, albeit in varying degrees and shades. According to Beckerleg:

people can aspire to become Swahili, as many diverse people have done over centuries. They have adopted the values of the culture along with the external trappings that proclaim their allegiance. From an outsider's perspective they may be described as 'Swahili' while from within labels more precise and redolent of status are attached. The value of the term Swahili lies in its application to people of diverse ethnic origin, who broadly share a common language, culture, religion and who have taken the preoccupation of Swahili society as their own.²⁸

Beckerleg makes a significant point about becoming Swahili - the process has been happening for many centuries, and those to whom the label is attached by others, they regard themselves as other than Swahili. However, when they adopt the 'Swahili culture', they also bring something with them. Determining the extent to which the visitors from across the Indian Ocean influenced the so-called 'Swahili culture', has been the focus of many coastal scholars, with little contribution being attributed to the interior peoples. Though Nzibo sees their contribution as unislamic, at least he acknowledges the fact that the cultural beliefs and practices of the Wadigo, Wanyamwezi, Wamanyema and many others, became part of the Swahili culture and were passed on to the Muslim converts. Over the years, layers of practices have continued to pile up as more people graduate into the Swahili category. Therefore, it is difficult to distinguish between what is originally 'Swahili' Islamic practice, and what is originally Nyamwezi or other Swahilized and hence Islamized practice.

As has been said above, in the coastal social setting, the population was divided by wealth, kinship, and of course residence in time and space.

²⁸ S. Beckerleg, 1990:27.

In the absence of the fundamental values attached to the traditional coastal notions of civility, namely, stone houses; financial credibility; length of residence in town; and more importantly kinship, the group that identified itself as the 'Swahili' and assumed the mantle of *ungwana* in Meru, had to find viable substitutes, onto which its members could hold. Here they found themselves in a strange and rather hostile social environment, where they were numerically insignificant, but by creating a web of relations functioning at different levels, they turned what might have been their predicament into an asset by trying to mirror the coastal society: to the *mahaji* or converts, they posed as the exemplars of the faith, the *waungwana* - with their feeling of superiority hinged on the claim to superiority of "those born in the faith" over "mere converts", that is *kuzaliwa katika dini*, as opposed to *kusilimishwa*.²⁹ Considerable emphasis was laid on the superiority of those who were Muslim by 'birth' over those who had been converted to Islam. *Kuzaliwa katika dini* automatically placed its 'holders', since it was regarded more or less like a qualification, on a higher level than the converts. It is interesting to examine the application of the coastal notions of civility in what can be termed a 'fossilized' form as the Muslims in Meru tried to mirror the coastal society.

'A Country Cock Does Not Crow in Town'

Both the Swahili and the Nubians looked down upon the *mahaji* as "mere converts". The prevailing attitude was that, since the *mahaji* in Majengo had been converted, they could not be equal to the Swahili. As said in chapter 1 the use of the term '*mahaji*' itself was somewhat derogatory. It connoted lack of religious profundity:

²⁹ For a fuller discussion on the function of 'birth' in construction of a common Muslim community identity, see chapter 3, pp.153-154.

What do they know, these are newcomers to *dini*? Only recently they were *washenzi*, before we came to Meru and brought religion and civilization. We taught them how to wash and dress themselves.³⁰

In such debasing remarks, the attitude of the 'exemplars of faith' to the converts is evident.³¹ Underpinning this attitude towards converts was the coastal notion of inequality, now imported into Meru and expressed in the proverb that: "*Jogoo la shambani haliwiki mjini*", meaning that 'a country cock does not crow in town'.³² This proverb makes a particularly important point - it emphasizes the position of the *mahaji* vis-a-vis the Swahili in Meru. It is necessary here to point out that this notion was also symbolically reinforced by the location of Majengo outside the township.³³

At a glance, both the proverb and the sheikh's statement cited above, fit Janmohamed's rationalization of the perceived differences between people of the coast and those of the hinterland. But as has been illustrated above, hardly any *waungwana* joined the caravans or sought work in the European farms or worked as servants for the colonial administrators in the inland stations. Therefore, the few of those in Meru who could trace their origin to the coast proper were people from the lower social strata. The

³⁰ Interview with Sheikh Mamoun, Mjini, 26th October 1991. As will be shown in the next chapter, even the children born to the Meru women married to the Nubian ex-Askaris were not allowed to speak their mothers' language, that is Kimeru. It was regarded as the language of *washenzi*. The children were encouraged to learn their fathers' language, that is Kinubi, which H. Kyemba, (1977:18) has termed the Nubians' "own version of Arabic".

³¹ Similarly, the term 'Haji' was contemptuously applied to the Digo converts, see D. C. Sperling, 1970:74.

³² Interview with Mwanaidi, Mjini, 20th November 1991.

³³ It has been said above that the returning *mahaji* acquired a piece of land for their settlement on the ridge beyond Kathita river, outside the precincts of the township. It was much later when the area was brought within the boundaries of the township.

majority of the so-called Swahili in Meru were people of diverse backgrounds, themselves possessing none of the ancient coastal literary tradition and urban civilization. They fit the description of the category that Nzibo, in his analysis of the social hierarchy in the early Swahili-Muslim communities of Nairobi, calls *mwinyi*. He suggests that, prior to the second world war, the African Muslims could be divided into three social classes: the *waungwana*, the *mwinyi* and the *mahaji*. The *mahaji* were at the bottom of the ladder. The *mwinyi* class consisted of a variety of Tanganyikan and central African tribes who had come to Kenya as porters or *askaris*, and people who had come from the coast as Muslims.³⁴

Yet in opposition to the *mahaji*, they projected themselves as the model of Swahili-Islamic civilization. As I have suggested above, they assumed the role of *waungwana* and the *mahaji* were often reminded that they were the 'country bumpkins', unfamiliar with the notion of urbanity and 'civilization'.

This attitude was explicitly expressed through song and dance during the annual religious festivals. The festivals, besides their intrinsic religious value, provided an opportunity for each group to express its identity in relation and opposition to another. Mwanaidi who was a young 'Swahili'³⁵ woman then, describes the happenings in which we see this expression of identity, with a feeling of nostalgia:

On *Idd* day, individuals organized feasts in their homes and the prayers were performed by all at the Swahili mosque. In the subsequent three days, the township was a hub of activity: the young sung and danced, they moved in processions, beginning at the Swahili village and ending at the Nubian on the fourth day.

³⁴ Y. A. Nzibo, 1986:140

³⁵ Mwanaidi was born to a Mnyamwezi father and a Meru mother, and therefore she was not classed among the *mahaji*. She identified herself and was identified by others as a 'Swahili'.

These processions were usually highly emotionally charged and the leading elders often lost control over the excited youths and women. Consequently, the end of the celebrations was marked by fierce fighting, sparked off by the insinuating songs. These songs were deliberately provocative, the dancers launched scathing attacks on their rivals.

Provocation and violence were inevitable. The tension that accumulated throughout the festivities, usually exploded into a fight - it was a collective responsibility to protect the members against any external attack. These episodes were strikingly dramatic. As the groups moved in processions, *watu wa mashambani*, that is the 'country bumpkins', as the *mahaji* were referred to, would defiantly not give way to the Swahili or *Wanyamwezi wa unga na kikapu*, that is 'the Nyamwezi who subsisted on maize meal', as the *mahaji* in turn referred to them.

Such defiance and provocation usually resulted in fighting between the groups. Consequently, the police intervened to stop the clashes, but their intervention usually failed to see the end to the matter until the elders deliberated on the issue and exacted a fine from the aggressors. Exacting a fine from the aggressors did not serve as a deterrent because the same events were repeated in the following year, nevertheless. Similarly, *maulid* celebrations were organized separately in each village in turn, with each trying to outdo the other.³⁶

Here the songs provided an effective medium of communication between the various groups: the singers directed sharp criticism at their rivals and at the same time expressed their group identities in a way that might have been otherwise difficult, if not impossible to do. The *mahaji*, for instance, as members of Jumuia-tul-Baladia expressed their sympathy for the nationalist cause and voiced dislike for the Swahili hegemonic tendencies. The role of song and dance in expressing various themes has been given an interesting analysis by Spencer.³⁷ He gives various functions of dance as: vehicle for expressing emotion and feeling; and dance as a means of generating group cohesion. Seen in the light of Spencer's analysis, the festivities in Meru, besides providing entertainment, furnished a forum

³⁶ Interview with Mwanaidi, Mjini, 20th November 1991.

³⁷ P. Spencer, 1985:1-38.

for people to express their community identity, not only as a religious but also as a social group through the use of song and dance.³⁸ This explains the popularity of these events and the enthusiasm with which they were executed.

In his study of the early Muslim communities of Nairobi, Nzibo, provides background information to the military type of dance associations that emerged among the Muslim communities in many urban centres in Kenya. On discharge after the First World War, African soldiers who had acquired some skill in playing in the military brass band, promoted a military type of dance known as *beni* (band) dance. The dancers imitated the Scottish regiments and the dancing clubs were named after sections of the British armed forces: *Kingi* (King), *Scotchi* (Scotts), *Marini* (Marines) and *Arinoti* (Aeronautics). Similar dancing associations were formed in various towns; many people, men and women, became associated with "the new dance craze".³⁹ In the 1920s, other dances: *mserego* from Zanzibar, *ngoma* from Lamu and *kimungwe*, a kind of Scottish country dance, were introduced among the Muslim communities in Nairobi. Again, the outbreak of the Second World War was to revitalize the dance associations and provide motivation for the formation of new ones, for instance; Arabia Congo dance association was formed in Nairobi in 1939.⁴⁰ In Meru, *kimungwe* and Arabia Congo established themselves, though with much less success than they had achieved in Nairobi. As Strobel observed among the Muslim women in Mombasa, dances were performed during weddings and

³⁸ Also see A. Cohens, *Masquerade Politics* for another example of this kind of study.

³⁹ Y. A. Nzibo, 1986:165.

⁴⁰ In terms of the organization and enthusiasm, and perhaps as an expression of identity, these street associations and the dance performances, could be compared to the West Indian carnival celebrations, though the carnival is on a grander scale. See Abner Cohen's (1993) study of the London Notting Hill Carnival.

religious calendrical communal celebrations where "antagonisms were revealed in song".⁴¹

Rivalry is a salient characteristic of the Swahili society and *maulid* and other social events, including marriage ceremonies, have over the years provided the means for expressing this rivalry. There is a competitive edge to almost every social communal and even personal affair. Beckerleg reminds us of the 19th-century rivalry among the Swahili city-states that precipitated their decline: "the history of the Swahili shows rival ethnic groups and towns in a continuous battle for power and social position".⁴² Again, the significance of playing up the notions of 'Swahiliness' for the group that came to identify and be identified as the 'Swahili' in Meru should be borne in mind. These celebrations therefore, in their own significant way, perpetuated the rivalry that characterized these communities as they endeavoured to mirror the coastal society in a completely different social setting in Meru.

In order to illustrate the attempt to emulate the traditional coastal society, I will examine some of the concepts and idioms which were borrowed from the *ungwana* culture and reinterpreted to fit the exigencies of the life of the emerging Muslim communities in Meru. As said above, control of education by the *waungwana* who viewed the slaves and all non-*waungwana*, "as incapable of understanding sophisticated knowledge",⁴³ was one of the ways of creating and sustaining social differentiation in the Lamu traditional society. Similarly, in a bid to isolate the *mahaji* and legitimate their own paternalistic tendencies, the Swahili in Meru argued that the *mahaji*, being mere converts and therefore, lacking in religious

⁴¹ For a fuller description of Lelemama dance associations, see M. Strobel, 1976:213.

⁴² S. Beckerleg, 1990:15.

⁴³ A. H. M. El-Zein, 1974:35.

profundity, could not even provide qualified religious teachers for their children.⁴⁴

But some of these *mahaji* had come from Nairobi where they had witnessed the widespread disaffection towards the Swahili, when it was realized that the Swahili had all along paid lip-service to Islam, and used it cunningly to foster their own hegemonic interests.⁴⁵ The experiences of these *mahaji* in Pangani⁴⁶ were brought to bear upon the situation in Meru, by providing the motivation and means to resist Swahili paternalism. Therefore, they found two teachers from among themselves: Mzee Twa and Asuman Nchurai, each of whom ran and maintained a school in which religious instruction was given to the *mahaji* children in the teacher's house. Nevertheless, the Swahili insisted on providing a teacher for the *mahaji* on the grounds that their own men could not pronounce the Arabic words correctly since they were not used to speaking Kiswahili or Arabic.⁴⁷ This move was vehemently resisted by the *mahaji*.

At issue here was not their competence - whether or not these two men were qualified to teach - but principally that they were themselves *mahaji*, and therefore not capable of mastering religious knowledge, which was then considered to be the prerogative of individuals from a social class

⁴⁴ Interview with Nyanya, Majengo, 23rd October 1991.

⁴⁵ For further information on the controversy between the new teachers returning from the coast and the Swahili leaders in old Pangani whose social status depended upon their putative religious authority, see A. Kubai 1992:40.

⁴⁶ In his analysis of the social stratification in the Muslim villages of Nairobi prior to the Second World War, Y. A. Nzibo (1986:40) identified three social classes: *waungwana*, *mwinyi* and *mahaji*. In Pangani, the *mahaji*, as converts, were at the bottom of the social ladder and "resented the religious domination and also the open discrimination practiced by them" (the Swahili).

⁴⁷ Mzee Ibrahim claimed that the two *mahaji* teachers, Mzee Twa and Asuman Nchurai were more qualified than most, but they would hardly be recognized as such by the Swahili.

or group to which these two did not belong. The point of contention was not their Muslim learning, but their status on the scale of the 'Swahili' culture. This scale, as has been said above, was drawn upon what I have termed 'fossilized' notions of civility, notions which seem somewhat misplaced in the modern society, since the traditional distinction between *waungwana* and *washenzi* was applicable only in a system of social inequality then based on the institution of slavery.

Nonetheless, this notion of inequality found new expression and meaning in the distinction between those who saw themselves as the exemplars of the Muslim faith in Meru and the converts. Group identity was constructed through the reenactment of selected aspects of coastal urbanity, class locality, affiliation and ascribed social status, elements which were now transposed in a different milieu in Meru. Marriage also became instrumental not only in confirming a person's position in one group, but also for obtaining such a position. A case of two sisters could well illustrate this point: Kainda, the elder sister, married into the Swahili community (though she told me that her husband was a Mnyamwezi) and therefore lived in the Swahili village; while her younger sister married a *mahaji* and lived in Majengo.

Kainda, married to a 'Swahili' man (since a Nyamwezi was not considered to be *mahaji* but a Swahili) gained a certain respectability as a wife of a *Mswahili* and effectively abandoned her former (*shenzi*) status, acquiring her husband's 'Swahili' status. She and her children identified themselves as Swahili. In contrast, her sister, Karimi, who married into the *mahaji* community identified herself as a *mahaji* and therefore was considered unequal to her sister.⁴⁸ Of course they were not considered to

⁴⁸ Interview with Karimi, Mjini, 26th November 1991. She explained that though both the sisters had been converted through marriage to Muslim men, they were not considered by the Swahili to be equal - Karimi was treated as one of the 'Swahili', while her sister was seen as a *mahaji* or convert.

be equal in status because the one was considered to be a Swahili and the other a *mahaji* - as I have explained above, in the eyes of the Swahili a *mahaji* was one without religious profundity. Thus Kainda and her sister belonged to two social-religious categories by virtue of marriage. However Karimi's children, as will be shown in the next chapter, were considered to be equal to their (Swahili) cousins, since they, unlike their parents, were born in the faith and not converted.

As will be illustrated in the next chapter, the first generation of Muslims descending from the *mahaji* attached a great deal of importance to "religious names".⁴⁹ The reason for this was that, after conversion, one acquired an Arabic name in addition to the Kimeru name or names. Therefore a person's name, for instance Ali M'Ingentu, was indicative of his religious background - it was possible to tell that he was a convert who had acquired an Arabic name after conversion and retained his Kimeru name or names. In contrast, his children's first names were Arabic, to which they appended Ali as their surname: one was Yusufu Ali and the other Abdallah Ali. For this second generation of Muslims, emerging from the *mahaji* section, it was important to have double Arabic names without Kimeru appendages in order to obliterate their *mahaji* background. Perhaps it is this phenomenon that led Nzibo to conclude that "the process of Swahilization seems to have been very effective among second generation *mahaji*"⁵⁰ in Nairobi. In Meru, they were considered by the Swahili to be on a higher stratum (at par with their Swahili cousins) and therefore better Muslims than their *mahaji* parents. They were considered to be better Muslims than their parents because they had acquired their religious status through birth and not through conversion.⁵¹

⁴⁹ See chapter 3, (p.154) for more information on the significance of having double Arabic names.

⁵⁰ Y. A. Nzibo, 1986:131.

⁵¹ Interview with Abdallah, Majengo 26th August 1991.

It is useful here to show how an individual's identity could shift back and forth. Mwanaisha's life history as she narrated it is a good example:

I was brought up by my aunt who was married to a Mngaziya, (a Comorian) and therefore, I was not considered to be a *mahaji*. In fact very few people, if any, knew that this Mngaziya was my uncle and not my father. I was tutored in the Swahili way and when I grew up, I was taken to a tutor (*somo*) who prepared me for marriage. I was first married to a Somali K.A.R. man. But I did not like him, so I ran away and came back to my aunt. After some time I married Athuman, one of the pioneer *mahaji* founders of Majengo. I lived with him here in Majengo. Though I grew as a Swahili girl, since my aunt was married to the Mngaziya and everyone thought I was their own daughter, after marriage to Athuman, I was treated as one of the *mahaji*. Those days, the Swahili looked down upon the *mahaji* and each group tried to maintain a separate identity. I knew that by marrying Athuman, not only would I have to live in Majengo which was then only occupied by *mahaji*, but also identify with the *mahaji*. For instance, during weddings and other occasions when we were invited to the other side, (either by the Nubian or the Swahili) I would sit in the *mahaji* group, and not among the Swahili.⁵²

In her life time, Mwanaisha's identity changed twice. Before she was adopted by her Muslim aunt, she was just like any of her six siblings, but when she left her village and went to live in town with her aunt, life changed and she became a different person: she learnt Kiswahili, and acquired all the external trappings of Swahili-Islamic culture. That is the first change of identity because she became a Mswahili, and therefore different from her non-Muslim brothers and sisters who were left in the village.

She was brought up as a Swahili girl, and retained this identity even after her marriage to a Somali soldier. But after her marriage to Athuman, her identity and status changed - she was now regarded as one of the

⁵² Interview with Mwanaisha, Majengo 23rd October 1991.

mahaji by her Swahili relatives. Shift in identity was reflected in the change of place of residence and vice versa. This was particularly so because Majengo was then outside the township, and therefore, Mwanaisha's move from the Swahili village to Majengo signified a departure from one community to another. The implication of such a shift of identity was that one had to remain within the social boundaries of one's group - Mwanaisha had to identify with the *mahaji* and not the Swahili. By marrying into the *mahaji* community, Mwanaisha lost her place among the Swahili. At that time, (late 1920s and 30s) the social boundaries between the converts and the standard bearers of the faith, that is the Swahili, and the *mahaji*, were clearly delineated.

'He Who Walks With a Fisherman Smells of Fish'

In Meru, the underlying concept of *dini*, in other words, the cultural dimension of Islam, was manipulated by the Muslims to define and sustain themselves as a separate group. The *ushenzi* and *ungwana/dini* constructs were used to shape the relationship with non-Muslims. Part of the ethos of being a Muslim meant exercising the restraints within the parameters of what was understood to be *ungwana*, that is shunning *ushenzi*. Their representation of Islam to the rest of the Meru society could be summed up by the proverb 'he who walks with a fisherman smells of fish', (*mfuatana na mwuzi hunuka vumba*).

During the first 18 years after their arrival, there was little interaction between the Muslims and the Meru people. Except for the occasional marriage to local women, it appears that the presence of the Swahili and Nubians, in the town, posed little threat to the Meru social order. Therefore, the development of forms of social interaction that, in many cases, enhanced the process of cultural exchange, was hindered partly by the formation of Muslims in the town into close-knit groups which were socially and spatially separated from the rest of the Meru people. The closed

nature of the Muslim settlements minimized social contact between them and the majority of the people, whose customs and general way of life the Muslims derided as backward, *ushenzi*. As a result of this attitude, the tendency was to keep the *washenzi* at bay, as one would something highly contagious. The prevailing situation is captured vividly by an informant in the following extract of an interview:

During this time people treated others as if they had a contagious disease that would be passed on to others through physical contact. It was considered unacceptable for Muslims to shake hands with non-Muslims... When non-Muslims visited their Muslim relatives living in town, they were served food on banana leaves! The reason for this was that non-Muslims were said to be dirty and unclean, and since it was the custom that the members of the family and even the guests (of course not forgetting the separation of the sexes) eat together from one large bowl, it was unacceptable for them to join in the meal. On the same token, it was felt that if they used the utensils in the house when they visited, this would render them unclean and therefore unfit for use by Muslims.⁵³

To observe the distinction between *halal* and *haram* was not a novel aspect of Islam in Meru. It must be emphasized that Islam was inextricably linked with the coastal notions of 'civilization', and the Muslims demonstrated this 'civilization' "concretely by importing things like textiles and ceramics from overseas" which became "an essential attribute of the cultured Swahili man".⁵⁴ The point is that the Muslims in their interpretation of *ungwana*, went a step further to treat the 'condition of being without religion', in other words *ushenzi*, in which they regarded the non-Muslim Meru people to be, as if it were a highly infectious condition that could be transmitted through the slightest form of contact. Thus the proverb cited above makes a particularly important point here, it warns against close association with *washenzi*. The point of this proverb was that if a higher person (in this case a Muslim) closely interacted with a lower

⁵³ Interview with Mwanaisha, Majengo, 24th October 1991.

⁵⁴ J. de V. Allen, 1973:122.

person (*mshenzi*) s/he will be like the lowly person, and that was contrary to the rules of *heshima*.⁵⁵ The concept of what in this context, was understood to be *ungwana* and *ushenzi* was open to various interpretations and thus became rather fluid. It lacked a precise definition as it acquired a considerable degree of elasticity, best utilized at the discretion of individual Muslims in their dealings with non-Muslims. To some, it was extended to embrace every aspect of social intercourse, for instance, they did not shake hands with *washenzi*, just as the *waungwana* at the coast had to keep a distance from the lower people.⁵⁶

It can also be said that the response was two-way and the aversion mutual - at the other end of the continuum was the Meru people's belief in the primacy of their customs and practices; and a very strong apprehension about Islam and Muslims. It is evident, that the Swahili and other foreign practices offered no attraction, and some even found them revolting.

Today the concept of *ushenzi* is played out by Muslims in a variety of ways in everyday context, as can be illustrated by the following incident that I witnessed.

I was interviewing two informants in a tea kiosk belonging to a Muslim when a woman came in and asked for some water to drink. The owner of the kiosk told her in Kiswahili to take a glass and fetch the water for herself from the kitchen wash basin, but she did not understand, so she went to the sink and begun to wash her hands in

⁵⁵ In the traditional Lamu society, it was considered disgraceful for a higher person to associate closely with a lower person. Such behaviour was contrary to the rules of *heshima*, which each person had to observe by behaving as was expected of them, in line with the requirements of their own social category. This proverb was particularly relevant in defining the relationship that should exist between the *waungwana* and non-*waungwana*, A. H. M. El-Zein, 1974:62-3.

⁵⁶ In the traditional Lamu society, members of "higher social categories had to keep a distance even in physical contacts. For example, they did not shake hands with other people", A. H. M. El-Zein, 1974:63. In Meru, this was interpreted in terms of the contact between Muslims and others.

order to drink the water from her cupped palms. The owner of the kiosk got angry with her for washing her hands in the sink used for washing the vegetables in and started shouting to her to get out of his kiosk. She did not understand why he was shouting at her so she thought that she was required to pay for the water. I intervened and explained to her in Kimeru the cause of the misunderstanding, she apologized and left. Afterwards, the owner of the kiosk explained that that incident would not have happened if the woman had not been a *mshenzi*. He attributed the misunderstanding to her ignorance since she neither understood what he was saying to her in Kiswahili, nor realize that it was inappropriate for her to wash her hands there. Such behaviour, he said, was typical of *washenzi*.

Here it is interesting to note that from the Muslim man's point of view, *ushenzi* was the readily available explanation for the misunderstanding between himself and the woman in need of a drink of water. Thus *ushenzi* is still experienced by the Muslims in everyday contexts of their interaction with non-Muslims.

Mystification of Islam

Islam was portrayed by the Swahili in Meru as something beyond the comprehension of ordinary mortals, so to say: the teacher and the sheikh (and supposedly all Muslims) claimed and ostensibly displayed their ability (rare in these circumstances) to read a book written in a foreign language; and performed prayers in a manner which appeared rather ludicrous in the eyes of the non-Muslims. This is comparable to the ridicule of Muslim prayer among the Galla of Ethiopia. Fisher points out that non-Muslim Galla ridiculed their Muslim brothers "comparing them to back-rinsers, who like monkeys cry at special times of the day".⁵⁷

It is evident that the Swahili clung tenaciously to apparently trivial external cultural symbols, for instance, the mode of dress, paying relatively

⁵⁷ See H. Fisher, 1993:16. In Meru, carrying a jug of water for the purpose of ablution was particularly unappealing to potential converts.

less attention to the scriptural and doctrinal dimensions of Islam throughout the period between 1910 and 1955. Illustrative of this point is the process of acculturation, devoid of religious instruction on the fundamentals of the faith, that the local women married to Swahili went through. For the *mahaji*, it was admittedly meritorious (and almost obligatory) to emulate the Swahili standards of piety, both because of the notions of civilization that the Swahili fostered; and the desire to elevate themselves and bridge the gap between themselves and the Swahili on the one hand, and at the same time widen the one between themselves and their *washenzi* relatives on the other.

At that time, women did not frequent the mosque, except during the *Idd* and *maulid* celebrations.⁵⁸ However, men were expected to be pious and knowledgeable in religious affairs. Women were mainly concerned with the organization of such communal affairs as *arubaini*⁵⁹ and *matanga*.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ As will be shown in chapter 5 (pp.216-217), women begun to frequent the Jamia mosque as a show of solidarity during struggle between the Asian and African sections of the Muslim community for its control.

⁵⁹ *Arubaini* means forty, but here it is the ritual performed on the fortieth day after a person is dead. Once I attended *arubaini* ceremony at the home of a prominent Muslim in the town. The sons of the deceased man had provided the money to buy food and the women under the leadership of the chairperson of one of the women's self-help groups prepared the food. The ceremony was held in the afternoon and when all the guests were seated, the leading sheikh briefly addressed the gathering and said the prayers. Then the food was served to the large number of guests who were invited. After the leaders had left, other guests left at leisure. When I enquired from some of the women, they said that failure to sponsor the ceremony for their deceased father, would incur retribution - the deceased would not rest in peace and his children would not prosper.

⁶⁰ In the traditional Lamu society, the ritual of *mtanga moja*, that is observing mourning together, was based on the bonds created by marriage between equals. Through *mtanga moja*, a group tied together by marriage "shared the experience of mourning" (A. H. M. El-Zein, 1974:56). El-Zein explains that the women in the group which was bereaved were secluded for three days following the demise of a member, and were not allowed to use perfume. In Meru, and other places in the

They collected the donations, publicized the events and did the cooking. These arrangements were in the female domain.

More emphasis was laid on external signs of compliance than on the acquisition of religious knowledge and the propriety of religious practice, for instance, the correctness of the prescribed posture during prayer.⁶¹ The result was that most of the converts understood very little about the fundamentals of Islam. Hence the tendency to mystify those aspects that appeared inexplicable. In these circumstances, it became difficult for many potential converts to adopt Islam for its religious appeal, which, as will be shown below, was apparently lacking.

Muslims in Meru mystified Islam with the result that many people conjured up all sorts of images about it, for instance it came to be associated with the age-old practice of witchcraft. In the Meru cosmology, the structure of knowledge can, in a general sense, be said to function hierarchically at three levels: the common, the allegorical, and the secret, or that which is incomprehensible to the ordinary person, and hence consigned to the realm of magic and the supernatural. One early European

interior, the fundamental aspect of kin sharing the loss of one of their own, was lost - it was transposed with the practice of mourning whereby fellow Muslims, regardless of whether or not they were related to the bereaved, could participate in the ritual. More important, while in the Lamu classificatory system it was linked to the practice of marriage between equals and derived from the bonds created by such marriages, in Meru where the people were incognizant of this social significance of the ritual, it was seen as a matter of religious practice. It was believed the entire Quran must be recited by certain individuals during this period so as to give respite to the soul of the deceased. Sheikh Mwinyi, (interview, Mjini, 19th November 1991) said that in many cases, the readers who were paid to do the reading did not read the entire Quran as required.

⁶¹ It will be shown in chapter 6 that many of the converts in the rural areas, where the main emphasis is on the acceptance of Islam rather than the acquisition of the knowledge of the fundamentals of the faith, the correctness of the prescribed posture during prayer and even the ability to verbalize the Arabic prayers, are not given prominence in the process of winning converts. As a result, many women (and men) Muslim converts cannot perform prayers.

administrator, failing to grasp this essential aspect of Meru cosmology, commented that:

Black magic however enters very largely into the lives of the Meru... though the Meru fear and dislike witchcraft intensely, their belief in it is still altogether unshaken.⁶²

Like any other instrument of social control, this secret knowledge could be applied to good use or bad use, for example, to enhance social harmony and benefit the members of the society, or to provide treatment; or to cause disharmony and loss to society, for instance by inflicting sickness and death. The identity of its practitioners who put it to the latter use was not known with certainty because any of its possessors was liable to pervert it. Certain individuals were merely suspected of it. However, the society had the machinery to deal with the situation - when such an individual was caught and proven guilty, she (it was usually a woman that was caught though cases of male practitioners were not unknown) was publicly executed. This was a severe deterrent to others who might put this secret knowledge to other than good use.

Nevertheless, as Fadiman observes, though he confuses the identities and functions of doctor and witch or wizard, "the concept of witchcraft was an essential element of the Meru world view".⁶³ This may be true for many other societies, for whom it furnishes a means of manipulating the supernatural forces. But it is not intended here to enter into the vast topic of religion and magic, suffice it to say that the apparently inexplicable beliefs and practices of Muslims were interpreted in the traditional understanding of magic. Furthermore, this apparently unfamiliar type of magic was generally believed to be more efficacious than the traditional one,

⁶² Annual Report, 1929, DC/MRU/4/2.

⁶³ J. A. Fadiman, 1977:93.

the more so because it derived its potency from words written in a foreign language. The power of the written word has been acknowledged elsewhere.⁶⁴

Islam in this area was pervaded by secrecy not only because of the inexplicability of some of its fundamental concepts, but largely because of the severely restricted access to Arabic, the language of the Quran, of prayers, and of Islam. This inaccessibility of the Quran can be contrasted with the use of the Bible by the Christian missionaries in their endeavour to evangelize the Meru people. The Biblical verses were translated into Kimeru quite early⁶⁵ and it was not long before some of the pioneer Christian converts were able to read the Bible for themselves. Unlike the Bible the Quran acquired a magical value, it became a secret kept by the experts (that is the sheikh and or the teacher), to be read and used only by them. As I have just said, possession of any type of knowledge is a source of power. Goody reminds us that even during Pythagoras' time, not all was to be revealed to the people.⁶⁶ It was necessary for those who possessed knowledge to withhold it in order to maintain monopoly of the source of their power. Similarly, the mystification of the Quran in Meru by a few people who could read it, provided for them a source of power for they knew what others did not and they were feared for their knowledge which, it was believed, they were liable to use to harm others.

Secondly, the Muslims themselves harnessed the local people's fear of and dislike for manipulative magical powers to enhance the belief in the superiority of their magic over that of the traditional practitioners. In

⁶⁴ See J. Goody, 1968:227.

⁶⁵ Z. Nthamburi (1982:67) observes that "it was generally envisioned that to know Christian principles one had to have access to Christian literature, notably, selected passages from the scriptures or gospels. In Meru, St. Mark's and St. John's gospels were translated for this purpose".

⁶⁶ J. Goody, 1968:11-12.

seeking to insulate themselves against the wider Meru society; and preserve and protect their jeopardized minority status, the Muslims often made ostentatious displays of the apparently strange and supposedly Muslim paraphernalia that they alone possessed. For instance a type of incense popularly known as *rubadiri* which some individuals kept burning in their houses perhaps only for its aroma, was said to keep out any one who tried to enter the house with other than good intentions. The belief in the power of the eye is found among the Meru as well as among other African peoples. To avert the power of evil eye, charms were carried on the person, and one of the ways of dealing with envy was to place protective charms in the house or entrance to the homestead. Like those found among the Giriama⁶⁷ the protective charms have no healing property. The belief in the power of the eye and the tongue can explain the popularity of the Swahili-Islamic *hirizi* which was (and still is) believed to be more potent than the traditional. Also picture frames with Quranic inscriptions believed to dispel evil forces were displayed strategically on the walls in houses of Muslims.⁶⁸

Others practiced as medicinemen in order to supplement their income, though this is not to say that there were no genuine medicine-men among them. Treatment usually included the reading of certain phrases in Arabic, in addition to the administration of certain medicinal concoctions. The importance of the treatment to its recipients lay in the use of the Swahili paraphernalia: the sheikh himself, believed to possess a different type of knowledge than the traditional doctor, owing to his ability to read the Quran, makes the protective charms (*hirizi*) and uses such items as *rubadiri*, which were not only different from those used by the traditional medicineman, but also unknown to the latter. In addition, the sheikh made

⁶⁷ M. Udvardy (1989:45).

⁶⁸ For further discussion on the purpose of the picture frames with Arabic inscriptions, see chapter 6, p.285-287

charms, (*hirizi*) to be worn on the wrist, waist or neck for protective purposes. It is no wonder then that Muslims came to be invariably regarded as practitioners of witchcraft and possessors of magic by the rest of the people.

It must be said that what came to be (and still is in the minds of a great number of people) a strong association of Islam and magic in Meru was not totally unfounded or based only on the Muslim ostentatious display of strange paraphernalia,

for in Islam magic is legitimated by religion... the whole apparatus of cabalistic learning found in books such as al-Bunis *Shams al-Ma'arifa*, the use of magic squares, numbers and names, is closely tied in with the Holy Book and constantly employs the names of God...⁶⁹

Magical practices in Islam,

As long as they depend upon techniques which derive their validity from a Muslim source, Islam fully approves and sanctions magical structures which are directed towards such legitimate ends as the cure of disease, the prevention and curtailment of misfortune and the assurance of prosperity and success.⁷⁰

The use of these techniques is entirely left to the discretion of the individual user, with the result that some individuals use them to create disharmony. For instance, certain individuals claimed that they had the power to turn their adversaries into cats, cause madness, and inflict any other form of hurt on those who dared to incur their displeasure, as my informants put it.⁷¹

⁶⁹ J. Goody, 1968:228, citing E. Doute, 1909.

⁷⁰ I. M. Lewis, 1966:65.

⁷¹ Interview with Fatuma and Mariam, Kiengu, 8th August 1991.

I came to know of an interesting case of a man who "dared" to break into a mosque and steal cooking utensils and other items that had been stored there after the celebration to mark the end of Ramadhan. When the members of the mosque committee found out that the items had been stolen, a public appeal was made after the Friday sermon, urging the culprit to return the stolen items. The sheikh said that if they were not returned, the punishment for profaning the mosque lay with God - the Quran had the power to retaliate against such blasphemous transgressors. After three months a man in the next village collapsed and died shortly after. Soon rumour was rife that he was the culprit, and even before the cause of the illness was known, it had already been concluded that he died because the Quran had been 'read' for him.⁷²

Parallel illustrations of the power of prayer against those who profane the mosque have been recorded in the history of Islam in Africa as early as the 14th century, when a group of people opposed to prayer and Muslim practices in Kano, Nigeria, defiled the mosque. Muslims in Kano agreed that prayer was the only remedy against this blasphemy and they spent the whole night in prayer in the mosque. It is said that God answered their prayers and the very next day, the leader of the group that had defiled the mosque and all who participated in the defilement and their families were struck blind.⁷³ Except among the Jakhanke,⁷⁴ the use of prayer to curse, harm or cause fear for the cleric is a common element of African Islam. In East Africa, the reading of the Quran for magical purposes is

⁷² Interview with Musa, Amaku, 13th October 1991. This story was well known to the people living around the mosque and it served as a deterrent for any future potential vandals. It was re-told several times during my field work and since many people in this area believe in the efficacy of the 'reading' of the Quran for the purpose of recovering lost items, members of the dead man's family and other people were still convinced that the sheikh's reading of the Quran was the cause of the man's death.

⁷³ P. Ryan, 1978:21.

⁷⁴ With the exception of the Jakhanke, though prayer occupies a central role in clerical activity, cursing and "prayer against" are widespread amongst Muslims in Africa. L. Sanneh 1989:199 points out that a "category of prayer for which the evidence is very weak indeed among the Jakhanke is prayer used as a curse... the exploitation of prayer to harm, or threaten to harm, thus including fear and respect for the cleric".

mentioned quite early in the Swahili history in the myth of the founding of the ancient city of Kilwa.⁷⁵

But in the case under study, this particular incident illustrates the local people's perception of Swahili-Islamic magic. Kithioro's death, for that was the man's name, was not a straight-forward case of illness and subsequent death, he died of an unknown cause. The circumstances surrounding his death were open to various interpretations: to the non-Muslims, his death became a testimony to the efficacy the Swahili-Islamic magic and to the Muslims, it proved the point that the Quran, which the sheikh invoked when making the appeal, was potent enough to exact retribution for profaning the House of God. A pathological cause was out of the question. A theory was put forward that as long as the stolen items were retained by his family, other members would be affected and the entire family might be wiped out in the long run. In spite of lack of any evidence that the dead man had stolen items from the mosque, to prevent more harm coming to the family in question, the members decided to pay compensation to the mosque. The stolen items were not recovered but again an explanation was found in the theory that the dead man might have sold them away immediately, since he knew the inevitable outcome of stealing from the mosque. It is difficult to assess the depth of the local people's fear of the efficacy of the Muslim magic, but certain modes of behaviour and the use of certain phrases, for instance the speculation that this man's sudden death triggered, and even the suggestion that the family find and return the stolen goods, provide evidence that people are generally not unconcerned when some individuals claim that they (as Muslims) have access to power that can turn others into cats or harm them in many other ways.

It is no wonder then, that since Muslims became associated with the practice of magic, the whole concept of Swahilization, (which in Meru and

⁷⁵ See S. G. P. Freeman-Grenville, 1962b:74.

many other places in the interior was, and still is, synonymous with conversion to Islam) came to acquire gravely pejorative connotations in the minds of many people. It is believed by many people, the greater majority of them non-Muslims, that if the "Quran is read for an individual", (as it was believed to have been read in the case described above) s/he will inevitably become mad or suffer a serious misfortune.

It is common to hear a person saying to another: "if you do that to me, I will go to the Swahili sheikh", meaning 'if you force me to seek the help of the Swahili magic you will have yourself to blame for the consequences' which are believed to be irreversible. Hence 'to be read for' has become part of the daily vocabulary in Meru. If for any reason an individual begins to behave in a strange manner, to most people, the immediate course will be found in the suspicion that "he or she has been read for" rather than consider the possibility of nervous breakdown or mental illness. Madness is the more common consequence of a sheikh's 'reading', which may include the burning of the incense popularly known as *rubadiri*, and a host of other activities, though there is a catalogue of other types of misfortunes which are likely to happen. With such ideas about its effects looming large in the minds of many people, Islam failed to attract a large following.

The Significance of Structural Factors in the Meru Response to Islam

The representation of the magical elements of Islam by Muslims themselves and the local people's traditional view of the supernatural served to a large extent as deterrents to conversion to Islam. This phenomenon takes the discussion back to the pertinent question of the Islamization of African peoples. The role of chiefs and kings in the spread

of Islam in Africa and in West Africa in particular is well documented,⁷⁶ giving rise to the theory that a centralized source of authority furnishes the entry point for Islamic influence into such societies. Now examples of uncentralized Islamized peoples, such as Somali and Borana, have corrected this view.⁷⁷ The many facets of Islam in Africa defy the application of broad generalizations; rather, there is need for particularity in dealing with each of these localized forms of Islamic worship, in other words, of the many 'Islams' that function as constituent parts of the (whole) global Islam,⁷⁸ summed up in the immutable creed: "There is no god but Allah and Muhammad is His Messenger".

The diversity of African cultures cannot be overemphasized. Hence the point of encounter with Islam (whatever the model) and the subsequent result, may differ, not only from one society to another, but also from one moment in history to another within the same society. An important point to note is that various factors are relevant to various questions. Even for a case such as the one under study, different kinds of factors need to be invoked in order to explain the different aspects of Islam. Useful questions, as Peel suggests, are those that ask

⁷⁶ See N. Levtzion, 1968, for instance. This entire work is devoted to the role of chiefs in the development of Islam in West Africa. Also see the role of the Yao chiefs in Central Africa. The case of the Buganda Kingdom stands in its own category in East Africa, see J. D. Y. Peel, 1977:119-141; B. D. Kazozi, 1986:14-17; N. King and B. D. Kazozi, 1973:4-8; A. Oded, 1974:39-136. In Kenya where centralized societies were few, the chief of Wanga realized the advantage in the superiority of the firearms possessed by the caravan traders and thus welcomed them in his kingdom. As a result, what is now Mumias in Western Kenya became the first place in the interior where Islam predated the advent of colonial administration - Islam registered its presence there by the mid 1870s, M. A. Abdallah, 1971:20-25.

⁷⁷ See I. M. Lewis, 1966:32-33.

⁷⁸ R. Launay, 1992:5-7.

why conversion occurred when it did (rather than earlier or later), why it attracted the social categories that it did, why it moved through the society in the way that it did, why it occurred unevenly between areas as it did, why it occurred as suddenly or as slowly as it did...)⁷⁹

No single factor can answer all these questions for any given place, hence Peel warns writers against claiming "overriding importance for a factor to which they attribute great moral significance".⁸⁰ Apparently there is no firm sociological basis for generalization about which structural factors facilitate the spread of Islam and which hinder it. The process of the Muslim penetration and conversion defies broad generalizations - one structural factor might enhance the process in one society, and reverse it in another. Two examples could well illustrate this point: the rite of circumcision, if introduced by Muslims in a society where it is not traditionally practiced, it is seen as alien and it may be associated with Islam. In such societies, it may hamper conversion. In other societies where it is performed as a rite of passage at a later date than that prescribed by Islam, it acquires what Lewis refers to as duality: that is certain of its aspects are Islamized and therefore officiated by the local Muslim cleric (sheikh or teacher), while the others are officiated by the traditional expert.⁸¹

Yet in another domain, circumcision may cause a problem as it did in Meru in the early period when the pioneer converts were required to undergo a second circumcision, or Islamic circumcision. Initially, the Meru method of circumcision was seen as unclean and therefore unacceptable to the Muslims. Circumcision to the Meru people was (and still is to a large extent) the conferment of adulthood on an individual (for both men and

⁷⁹ J. D. Y. Peel, 1977:110.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p.110.

⁸¹ I. M. Lewis, 1966:68.

women) therefore, it was almost inconceivable for an adult man to be asked to submit to the Muslim demand for a second circumcision. Of course it would be impractical to carry out a second circumcision operation, so the sheikh insisted on symbolic shedding of blood in order for the convert to achieve the condition of cleanliness or *tohara*. My informants were unanimous that "no adult male would swallow his pride and submit to such an indignity and lose his social status, for that is what it amounted, in order to convert".⁸²

The conversion ceremony up till the early 1950s is described by one M'Mariu, converted in the early 1940s, thus:

After a person declared their intention to convert, they were taken to the sheikh, if there was one within reach. In some cases where the candidate happened to be the head of a household, the sheikh would be invited to the household and all the members would be converted. The candidate would make the profession of faith, the *kalimah*; then they would take a bath; cut their nails; and have their head shaven. After this physical cleansing, which symbolized spiritual cleansing, the convert donned new clothes bought for this occasion. In some cases the sheikh provided the turban, *kilemba*, long shirt, *kanzu*, cap and sandals for men converts, to symbolize a break with the past and the dawn of a new life.

The convert was then given a new name, the choice of which involved an interesting exercise: three names were written by the sheikh on pieces of paper which were folded and tossed in a bowl. The convert then picked up one at a time and handed it to the sheikh who read

⁸² One such pioneer explained (though with much difficulty since such matters are not discussed in the presence of women, and least of all with them) that this practice of shedding symbolic blood which had its origins in the old Muslim settlements in Nairobi was later abandoned. During my study of the early Muslim communities of Nairobi, I found out that during the period prior to First World War the converts in Pangani and other Muslim settlements in Nairobi were required to undergo a process of *tohara*, cleansing, to mark the beginning of a new life. If the convert had not been circumcised before conversion, the complete operation would be carried out and the initiate would be put in an initiation house to learn the Swahili culture. However, due to cultural implications and physical complications arising from this requirement, the practice was abandoned and replaced with the symbolic shedding of blood. See A. Kubai (1992:37).

the name aloud for all to hear. This process was repeated three times and if the same name was picked at least twice, it became the convert's name. They were encouraged to use 'religious names' which were highly valued.⁸³

It is interesting to note that the practice of ritual cleansing at conversion, was observed in the 11th century in the kingdom of Mali, West Africa, where the cleric exacted "some visible signs of interior conversion, including a complete bath and a change of garments after some rudimentary instruction".⁸⁴ The practice^{of} ritual cleansing at conversion as observed in Meru, was carried over from old Pangani and other Muslim settlements in Nairobi during the early period when conversion entailed being sprinkled with water by a sheikh, *kutiwa maji ya kata*.⁸⁵ The prospective convert went to the sheikh and stated his wish, after which the sheikh sprinkled some water on him/her from a nutshell, *kata*, and then chose a 'Muslim name' for the convert. A person responsible for the conversion of another was regarded as a 'father' and it was meritorious, though not obligatory, that a convert assume as his surname the name of his 'god-father'. Then the convert was taught how to pray and recite a few verses of the Quran. The girls who were thus converted were married to the

⁸³ It is interesting to note that while the *mahaji* retained their *Kimeru* names, the second generation of Muslims exhibited a tendency to use two Arabic names, for instance, Ali son of Osman M'Nabea would be Ali Osman. The significance of names will be dealt with below.

⁸⁴ P. Ryan, 1978:17. Ryan describes the ceremony of *wonk*, where the presiding cleric washed the convert's hands and legs three times each for the right and the left. Then the convert cleaned his nose and ears three times each. Sanneh (1979) suggests that this ritual which was performed at six in the morning, points to "strong Islamic influence, though the underlying religious outlook here is too traditional" (p.77).

⁸⁵ The practice of sprinkling water from a nutshell in the old Pangani is alluded to in my work on Islam in Nairobi, (A. Maingi, 1987:121). Also see Y. A. Nzibo, 1986:121-124.

sheikh's sons and others were married off to the sheikh's friends as his own daughters.⁸⁶

In the traditional Meru society, there were various forms of initiation⁸⁷ and the life of an individual was punctuated by various rites of passage as s/he went up the social ladder. The process of initiation was conceptualized in terms of 'birth' into the next grade or social class, therefore the novices were usually referred to as 'children'. They were initiated by older men. Eldership (for men only) was the culmination of a lifelong process of initiation into various social grades. Seen from the perspective of initiation into the various traditional councils that constituted the social ladder, conversion to Islam in Meru during the early period could not fit into the obtaining pattern of initiation rites, for instance, it could not be seen as one of the *njuri* grades to which adult men were initiated.

In these circumstances of the contact situation (contact between the Swahili-Islamic and Meru cultures) with least proselytization; and the motivating factors varying from one individual to another, the spread of Islam was left to fortuitous circumstances. My informants described several cases, (particularly in Igembe where these initiation rites were more elaborate than the rest of Meru)⁸⁸ of men who declined to convert to Islam because their would-be 'father' was a younger man.⁸⁹ The reason for this was the underlying concept of age-grade system, which determined the place of every individual in the society. To move up the social ladder, an

⁸⁶ A. Kubai, 1992:37. Also see Y. A. Nzibo, 1986:121.

⁸⁷ See J. M. Baikiao, 1977:100-110.

⁸⁸ The D.C. reported that "the natives of this district are absolutely sunk in superstition... Several organizations exist, such as Njiricheke (sic) and Kiama which being credited with supernatural power makes the work of administration very difficult". Annual Report, 1923, DC/MRU/1/1.

⁸⁹ Interviews with Asuman, 12th October 1991, Kiengu and Musa, Antubetwe-e-Njoune, 9th November 1991.

individual was initiated into the next 'social class'. Knowledge was transmitted vertically from the old to the young and never the reverse, and therefore, it was not long before a contradiction in trying to fit conversion into the existing age-set system became apparent. It was considered indecorous for older men to be 'initiated' into Islam by their juniors.⁹⁰

A second example to illustrate the variability of the impact of structural factors on the process of Islamization from one community to another, is the lineage system. While the lineage system among the Somali was said to facilitate Islamization⁹¹, the clan and its component lineage system, among the Meru, served as a stumbling block to the establishment of social contact with Muslims and thus hampered the process of Islamization. Indeed, the clan provided the only form of communal anti-Muslim response by preventing alienation of land for the settlement of Muslims, as it will be shown below.

This sense of hostility crystallized into a form of communal response when the *mahaji* returned around 1926 and tried to find a place to settle. Previously, the Meru had to contend with the foreign Muslims with whom there was no form of relationship - all forms of relationships either at personal or communal levels, being regulated by such social institutions as age-set system,⁹² *ichiaro*,⁹³ and membership to *njuri* and clan.⁹⁴ It was

⁹⁰ Interview with Asuman, Antubetwe, 15th October 1991. Also the mosques founded by leading local Muslim pioneers were described by one of them as "places for giving 'birth' (to new converts)". See chapter 6.

⁹¹ I. M. Lewis, 1966:34.

⁹² T. Spear and R. Waller (1993:40) in their description of the Maasai age system, which has close semblance to that of the Meru, defines age grades as "the successive statuses to which individuals are ascribed in the course of their lives. An *age-set* comprises all those within a broad range of ages who are formed into a group of peers with their own separate identity". Among the Meru, the age system is based on the rite of circumcision, which constitutes a group of individuals circumcised at the same time into an age group or age set. An age-set comprises three age grades, beginning with *Nding'uri*, followed by *Kobia* and

felt that the return of their own kinsmen who had absconded from the Meru society and joined the ranks of the foreigners by adopting Islam, posed a threat to the social status quo. Disregard for the customs was believed to incur the displeasure of the ancestors who safeguarded the welfare of the society.⁹⁵ By violating the customs, one automatically rendered oneself ritually impure, *muiro*, a condition which was believed to cause calamity, not only to the victim, but also to those related to her or him. By implication, this is what the Meru pioneer Muslim converts had done. Hence the *mahaji* found it difficult to gain acceptance among their own people.

finally *Kaberia*, separated by an interval of about 5 years between them. The members of one age set, form a group of peers and are bound to one another by the unbreakable bond of circumcision. This bond regulates inter-personal relations at a various levels, for instance, one is duty-bound to afford all possible help and respect to one's age-mates. On a theoretical level, children are expected to treat their fathers' age-mates as their own fathers, therefore, marriage cannot occur between a woman and a man of her father's age - he should be younger (or even older). Also see J. Mahner, (1970:*passim*) on the function of the age system in Meru.

⁹³ Lambert defines (*g*)*ichiario* as ritual brotherhood, instituted for purposes of peace and mutual help in war. "Gichiario, derived from *chiara*, bear, means simply 'birth' or possibly 'a large or greater birth' and does not by derivation imply a common birth or common blood based on ritual alone or patrilineal descent alone; it could equally apply to both." Lambert's is a rather narrow definition of *gichiario* or *ichiario*, depending on the Meru dialect in use, but he admits his lack of adequate knowledge about this important social institution. See Lambert Papers, LAM/1/2/1-9 chap. 3 p.259.

⁹⁴ The clan was the most important unit of social organization in Meru. Lambert in his description of the Meru social organization, uses the term "clan" to denote the largest unit in which a belief in a community of patrilineal blood is completely functional" (LAM /1/2/1-9 chapter 4, p.312). Usually there are two dimensions of this function: marriage and spilling of blood. One may not marry within his clan nor spill the blood of his clansman. The infallibility of the exogamy rule is absolute.

⁹⁵ For the role of the ancestors in the Meru cosmology, see J. M. Baikiao, 1977:111-113.

At the communal level, this rejection was manifest in the reaction of the clan, which personified the collective responsibility of the Meru society, to the attempts by the *mahaji* to obtain land for their settlement at the present Majengo.⁹⁶ To them too the label 'Swahili', which had acquired pejorative connotations in Meru, was invariably attached.⁹⁷ The action of the clan, which embodied the collective will of the Meru people, could therefore be seen as a systematic reaction to the Muslim presence at the communal level.

An Incident of Conversion and Social Crisis: the "Njea Curse"

As it has been said above, cursing has certain important functions among the Meru. The fear of its efficacy for example serves to reinforce certain aspects of inter-personal relationships. In principle the Swahili Muslims did not recognize, the potency of a curse in the Meru traditional context, or the significance of Meru customary ritual brotherhood (*ichiario*). These two were related in their function of defining and regulating inter-personal, family and communal relationships in the traditional Meru society.⁹⁸ The early converts, who were integrated into the emerging Majengo community, became enmeshed in new relationships based on Swahili-Islamic paradigms. They had left their extended families, who would have been socially obligated to render moral (and even material) support to them in their villages of origin; now the Muslim community filled this role - it provided the necessary communal moral support for the

⁹⁶ Communal response (by the clan) to the presence of Muslims is alluded to in chapter 1, pp. 61-62.

⁹⁷ The Meru traditional judicial system stressed the principle of equality before the law. For information on the Meru judicial system, see A. M. M'Imanyara, 1993:84.

⁹⁸ For a definition of *ichiario*, refer above footnote No. 88.

converts and fellow Muslims were seen as one's *jamaa* or family.⁹⁹ In a sense, the Muslim community replaced the traditional social setup for the converts living within the enclaves in the town. However, there were a few converts who returned to their villages in the rural area and sought to be reinstated in the traditional society, with all its positive expressions and means of social control.

My informants were quick to point out that the few converts who returned to their villages of origin in the rural areas, and tried to be integrated into the traditional society, lost their Muslim identity. Underlying this statement is the local perception of *ushenzi*. The relationship between Muslims and others was conceptualized in terms of the struggle between *dini* and *ushenzi*. As has been said above, *ushenzi* was treated as if it were contagious; therefore, it was considered perilous for a convert to leave the Muslim community and return to the village to live among *washenzi* relatives and friends.¹⁰⁰

It is not as if they themselves did not believe in the traditional forms of social control; after all, they had been raised in the Meru traditional society. For them, the whole process of conversion and Muslim identity was based on the distinction between themselves as 'people of religion' and others, in other words the perceived difference between *dini* (religion) and *ushenzi*. This distinction could only be achieved by emulating the Swahili, by becoming as Swahili as possible (as has been shown above, there are various degrees of Swahilization), and therefore, those traditional institutions which were considered unislamic could be substituted for

⁹⁹ Interview with Nyanya, Mzee Ibrahim, Halima, and Musa, Majengo, 26th November 1991. My informants were emphatic that the community in Majengo provided the support the members needed.

¹⁰⁰ The concept of *mji*, (town or settlement) and its territorial significance for Muslims is illustrated in the discussion on the spatial significance of Majengo in chapter 5.

Islamic ones. Seen from this perspective, a convert who returned to his rural village, and participated in the activities which, on the scale of the Swahili-Islamic culture, were considered to be *ushenzi*, was said to have 'become an unbeliever', *amekufuru*.¹⁰¹

Examples lending credence to this theory were readily cited by my informants. A case in point is an interesting occurrence, recorded in the District Annual Reports of 1939 and 1941 as the "Njea curse". It is described thus:

During the 1914-18 War a party of Rendille went to Igembe to buy food and were attacked by the youths of Njea who took their hides and skins from them. The Njea elders recovered some of the hides and returned them to the Rendille but some were never recovered and the Rendille laid a curse on Njea with the blood of a girl, of a ewe lamb, of a female kid, and of a female donkey foal, so that the land should bear thorns (devil's dice) instead of grass and become infested with ants. In August 1939 the Njea people reported to the District commissioner that the curse was beginning to work and that they had been advised by their medicine man to try to get the Rendille to lift it. They asked the District Commissioner to get the District Commissioner, Marsabit, to send some of the original party of Rendille, together with their wives, to Njea for this purpose... In October (1941) the District Commissioner, Marsabit said he hoped soon to be able to send the Rendille spell-raisers and the Njea people were told that this would be their last chance and to make up their minds whether they wanted the curse lifted or not. They replied they did. The Rendille party arrived in November and spent many days in Njea...But, as the District Commissioner, Marsabit, remarks, it is hoped that the Rendille have not left behind a delayed-action curse on which their sons can cash-in in twenty years time...¹⁰²

How did Islam come into this then? According to the Meru customs, certain families from certain clans were designated to offer sacrifices on behalf of the rest of the society. Therefore, when the Rendille party

¹⁰¹ Interview with Sheikh Mwinyi, Mjini, 16th November 1991.

¹⁰² This extract of the 1939 Annual Report is found in LAMB/1/2/8, p.11, University of Nairobi Jomo Kenyatta Memorial Library Archives.

returned to lift the curse and remove its afflictions on the people living in Njia,¹⁰³ the clan charged with the responsibility of performing the prescribed cleansing rituals, was faced with a problem because the person designated to perform the rituals had converted to Islam. He objected to these rituals, arguing that, as a Muslim, he could not participate in such ceremonies where he would be required by the custom to partake of substances considered to be religiously 'unclean' and forbidden for Muslims.¹⁰⁴

Such a social crisis as was precipitated by this man's conversion, had not been anticipated, and therefore, the only course open to the members of the clan was to prevail on him to oblige and do what to them, was his duty to the society. He found himself in a dilemma as the whole of Njia looked to his family, and to him in particular, to facilitate the lifting of the curse. The curse was beginning to work and failure to lift it would cause the land to bear thorns instead of grass and be infested with ants, with the result that whole society might be wiped out by these afflictions. Yet Islam did not recognize the efficacy of curse and therefore, the rituals to lift the curse were unislamic. He was faced with a question of choice between his Muslim identity and his society. His faith was a personal matter, but lifting the curse was important for the entire society, so he performed the rituals. Some of my Muslim informants showed more contempt for him than they would for an unbeliever.

Unequal Competition Between Islam and Christianity

There is evidence to suggest that the colonial authorities exercised a restricting influence on the spread of Islam in Meru, while they fostered the

¹⁰³ In the cited district annual report, Njia, which until 1992 was a large administrative unit in Igembe division, is spelt as "Njea", but the spelling that is currently in use is 'Njia'.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Asuman, Antubetwe mosque, 15th October 1991.

spread of Christianity. During the early years of the British Protectorate, Islam and Muslims found favour with such administrators as Sir Arthur Hardinge (the Commissioner of the British East African Protectorate 1895-97) and John Ainsworth. Initially the coastal Muslims proved useful for the colonial administrators because they were the only literate (in Arabic) indigenous people who, as a result of trade relations with the inland peoples, possessed some knowledge of the interior.¹⁰⁵ At the declaration of the British East African Protectorate in 1895, Sir Arthur Hardinge, the Commissioner, assured the Muslims that the British rule would not adversely affect their religious sensibilities; that Islam would be recognized as the public and the established creed on the coast; and that Islamic law together with the traditional government of *Wali* and *Qadhi* would be retained.¹⁰⁶

For quite some time, therefore, the Muslims were accorded a privileged status. They were considered to be civilized, Sir Arthur Hardinge saw the Swahili "and in general the native Mohammedan population of the coast as the only civilized element" which stood between the Europeans "and the utterly barbarous tribes of the interior".¹⁰⁷ He is said to have even envisaged the possibility of training the Swahili and using them to administer the whole of the protectorate. However, the situation began to change and the Muslims gradually lost their favourable position when both the government and the missionaries realized that expansion of coastal Muslim influence was a 'potential' danger inherent in the employment of coastal Muslims up-country. The government attitude henceforth, is summed up in the remarks of C.W. Hobley, a Provincial Commissioner (P.C.) in Mombasa who declared that

¹⁰⁵ A. I. Salim, 1973:77, citing Hardinge's report, PP.LX (1898),p.227.

¹⁰⁶ A. I. Salim, 1991:8.

¹⁰⁷ G. H. Mungeam, 1966:26.

it must be realized that it is not in our interest or in the interest of the people that the Mohammedan faith and sharia should spread among the Aboriginal tribes, in fact one may go as far as to say that the policy of the administration should be antipathetic towards Mohammedan propaganda and proselytization.¹⁰⁸

In Meru, no sooner had the Muslims settled than the Christian missionaries arrived. From the outset, the missionaries thought that their success depended entirely on systematic aggressive evangelization methods, to break down the existing social system. In the initial years of their work at Kaaga, near the township, the Methodist missionaries reported that:

Our operations may be conveniently divided into 3 sections viz: 1. Evangelistic; 2. Educational; 3. Medical; upon the understanding that the last two are subsidiary forms of activity. We exist as an evangelistic agency with express object of inculcating the Christian (Protestant) faith among the native population. We have been at work for 3 years during much of which time our activity has been restricted while we become acquainted with the language...

We have adopted the boarding system as being the only way in which we can secure regular attendance and sufficient control over the minds of the scholars.¹⁰⁹

This extract clearly illustrates the missionaries' advantageous position pitted against that of the Muslims. The latter could not boast of being able to apply such methods. Preaching of Christianity was organized and systematized, with western education¹¹⁰ and medical services being used as the major means for evangelization; while Islam was left to

¹⁰⁸ C. W. Hobley to Ag. D.C. Shimoni, March 1913, DC/KFI/3/1.

¹⁰⁹ R. T. Worthington to D.C. 15th April 1916, DC/MRU/1/1.

¹¹⁰ Z. Nthamburi (1982:67) notes that western education was an important aspect of missionary propaganda. "Literacy was required for baptism to take place... Public education was geared toward scripture reading..."

fortuitous circumstances. With the "express object of inculcating" Christian faith, the missionaries aimed to break what they saw as Meru intransigence by use of systematic proselytization which their rival Muslims, owing to the very nature of their presence in the region lacked. There is no comparison to be made between this aggressive Christian proselytization, and the circumstances of sheer chance to which conversion to Islam was left.

However, it would be erroneous to give the impression that the missionaries, in spite of this aggressive proselytization program, found it easy to win converts among the Meru. That for a period of 3 years, they did not manage to baptize any one, is a testimony to the fact that the spread of Christianity, too, was not as rapid as it might seem. The Meru people are described as "suspicious and resentful of the new ways that were brought by the foreigners".¹¹¹ The church made little progress and the first 11 baptisms were conducted in 1916 (four years later). Things did not improve until 1918-1919 when famine and influenza struck Meru and "had a salutary effect on the growth of the Methodist Mission", as many unfortunate persons sought refuge at the mission, converting to Christianity in the process of getting help during these difficult times. Thus these "natural disasters helped to accelerate the changes which had been brought about by the introduction of 'Pax Britanica'".¹¹²

The missionary endeavour to evangelize the Meru was inextricably linked with the administration policy as can be seen from the administrators' demand (though it was hardly met) that Christian converts be admitted to *Njuri*.¹¹³ By use of such methods, the government was

¹¹¹ Z. Nthamburi, 1982:63.

¹¹² Ibid., pp.61-62.

¹¹³ *Njuri*, which constituted the Meru government, was a powerful political-judicial council with sacred sanctions. It comprised various councils: *Njuri Ncheke*, *Njuri Impingire* and *Njuri Imbere*. Initially *Njuri* posed an obstacle to the establishment of colonial authority and for a long time, the district, unlike many

intent on gradually dismantling the existing social institutions which obstructed its authority and in 1924, it was reported that in many parts of the district

the hold over the natives by witch doctors and the guilds known as Njuri Ncheke and Njuri pingiri (*sic*) has during the year appeared to be slightly on the wane, owing chiefly to the re-organization of strong government Native Tribunals...¹¹⁴

This disintegration of the traditional Meru social institutions continued as the Christian missionaries, with the government support, endeavoured to spread Christianity. By 1940, the district commissioner, reporting on the work of the missionaries, said that:

I am glad to be able to record my opinion that as a result of the cooperation between the administrative officer and missionary the year 1940 will mark an important stage in the history of religion in Meru. For the first time, though in deed after a long preparation, Christianity has been brought into the very heart of the tribe...¹¹⁵

Whether the Christian religion had been brought to the very heart of the Meru people by 1940, is questionable, but the relevant point for our purpose in this extract of the D.C.'s report is the cooperation between the administration and the missionary in the spread of Christianity in Meru. There was no such cooperation with the Muslims and therefore Islam was an unequal competitor in the religious arena. It is also necessary to note, as the D.C. acknowledged, the preparation for the ground to sow the seed

others in the country, was ruled indirectly through the Njuri. See Lambert's use of indigenous institutions for administration, LAMB/1/2/9.

¹¹⁴ Annual Report 1924, DC/MRU/1/1.

¹¹⁵ District Commissioner's report on the work of the Christian missions in Meru, 1940 Annual Report, p.21, DC/MRU/1/4.

of Christianity was long in spite of the government support. It was not easy to spread Christianity in Meru.

To satisfy the African religious needs as the colonial administrators perceived them, it was deemed necessary to choose for him their own faith, which was "the foundation" of their "civilization". It was this civilization that they "caused to impinge on the African cultures."¹¹⁶

The situation as they saw it in Meru was summed up in the following words:

If we agree that something ought to be done about the Africans' religious needs the question arises as to what is the right religion to inculcate. And that is easily answered. Christianity is our own faith and the one that we are the most competent to teach. It is the one faith... the highest ethical code capable of general application to every day life... the problem is how to inculcate it. The problem is not for the few, for those who attach themselves to a mission station; it is one for the whole tribe, since it is the religion of the whole tribe that is withering away.¹¹⁷

With such notions as are expressed in this extract influencing the colonial policy in Meru, the spread of Islam was not only disadvantaged, but also curbed by the very nature of the colonial policy. With this explicit government support for Christianity, Islam was not an equal competitor for the souls of the people of Meru.

¹¹⁶ Annual Report 1940, DC/MRU/1/4.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. Annual Report 1940, DC/MRU/1/4

Conclusion

Bunger has argued that the process of Islamization is shaped by the nature of contact between Muslims and non-Muslims, and by the culture of the people who bring Islam, among other factors.¹¹⁸ To a certain extent, this is true of Islam in Meru. The cultural input of the 'Swahili' Muslims, based, as I have illustrated in this chapter, on the concept of 'fossilized' coastal notions of urbanity and civilization was a significant factor. Through the process of Swahilization over the years, many people came to identify themselves as 'Swahili', with the result that layers of practices were formed and later transported inland wherever Muslim communities were formed.

When Muslims arrived in Meru, these rather 'fossilized' concepts were transposed in a different cultural milieu. For instance, the group that identified itself as 'Swahili' re-enacted the coastal social stratification, originally based on the system of slavery. As a result, they posed as the exemplars of *dini* and by holding onto such notions, they were able to preserve a facade of superiority over both the *mahaji* and the rest of the Meru people. The creation and preservation of this facade had the result of insulating Muslims against the rest of the people of Meru.

Each group had its own notion of what Islam should be. The result was a fairly broad spectrum of actions and behaviour associated with the propriety of religious observance. Hence inconsistency and the resultant disagreements became the salient feature of Islam in Meru throughout the early period. The growth of this divided and mystified Islam was hampered by these very features.

There was also the culture of the people to whom Islam is brought from outside. The Meru social institutions proved a stumbling block

¹¹⁸ R. L. Bunger, 1975:1.

to the spread of Islam. The point I want to make from the foregoing discussion is that the Meru structural factors, perhaps more than any other factor, hampered the spread of Islam up till the end of the Second World War. Though the colonial administration policy favoured and encouraged the spread of Christianity, while it remained anti-Islam, it was not until the traditional social institutions had been systematically eroded, and where possible broken down in the process of westernization that followed the establishment of colonial rule, that even the favoured Christian faith gained a foothold on the Meru soil.

CHAPTER THREE

THE BEGINNING OF A NEW PHASE: THE EMERGING URBAN MUSLIM COMMUNITY IDENTITY

Introduction

The development of Islam in Meru can be divided into three distinct phases: the initial phase lasted from 1910 to the mid 1950s; while the second phase, beginning in the mid 1950s through the 1960s, saw the emergence of a new urban Muslim community and its subsequent consolidation. The last phase began with the advent of *Tabligh* at the end of the 1970s. In the previous chapter, I have discussed the key concepts in the representation of Islam by the pioneer Muslims and the response of the Meru people to the presence of Muslims in their midst, laying emphasis on the various factors that affected or largely tempered this response during the period before the Second World War.

As a primary premise in this chapter, I am concerned to demonstrate that during the latter period, that is the late 1950s and the 1960s, Islam in Meru was going through a process of change, as the pioneers were giving way to a new generation of Muslims. This double-edged change triggered the fusion of various Muslim elements, culminating in the consolidation of an urban Muslim community identity. The cataclysmic events of the *Mau Mau*¹ not only reinforced this change, but also permeated the social,

¹ *Mau Mau* is the liberation movement which rallied the Kenyan peoples together to fight for independence during the period between 1950 and 1963. There are several hundreds of works written on the various aspects of the movement, for economic origins of the *Mau Mau* and administration of oaths and propaganda, for instance, see W. Maloba, 1993:24-78, 98-133 and D. Throup, 1987:1-27, 139-162. For belated *Mau Mau* activity in Meru, see D. Njagi, 1993. The list could be much longer, therefore, we shall limit the discussion to the way in which the movement served as a catalyst to the changing situation of the Meru Muslims.

political and economic life of many Kenyans and the history of the country in general during the period prior to the attainment of independence in 1963. The *Mau Mau* movement and the demolition of the old Swahili village shook the Meru Muslim fraternity. Documentation of these events, including the description of various incidents, is necessary in order to account for both the past and present trends of Muslim influence in this region.

To do that, I will first illustrate the effects of post-war nationalism in Meru, then discuss the changing circumstances of the 1960s and finally show how this change manifests itself thereafter, in relation to the underpinning struggle between *dini* and *ushenzi*. In the previous chapter, it was illustrated how the struggle between *dini* and *ushenzi* operated at two levels: between those born in the faith and the converts, that is the *mahaji* versus the Swahili/Nubi, on the one hand; and the Muslims (as a whole) versus the rest of the Meru people whom the Muslims considered to be 'uncivilized' (*washenzi*), on the other. In this chapter, I will show how the balance of what is seen as *ungwana* shifts and alters the structure of the relationship between the Muslim groups and paves the way for the emerging urban Muslim community identity.

The Effect of Post-War Nationalism upon Muslims: 1948-1955

The Returnees

It has been mentioned in chapter 1 that Edward Butler Horne, the first colonial administrator in Meru, encountered violent resistance from the Tharaka and the Tigania sections of Meru. The Meru were averse to foreign influence and for many years they doggedly stuck to their customs, under the indigenous government of councils of elders, *Njuri*, which the colonial

administrators were quick to integrate into their administrative system in the district after they realized that:

There are no paramount chiefs in the district...but real authority is vested in the *kiama* or councils of elders, who work collectively...The strength of the *kiama* which is particularly noticeable in Tigania and Igembe has resulted in the native tribal organization being kept to a much greater extent than is the case in some districts, a feature which is by all means to be encouraged.²

Up to the end of the Second World War, the *Njuri* implemented the government policies and apparently there was no pressure for nationalism. But after the war, the situation changed as the Meru were awakened to the political consciousness which was already rife in other parts of the country. At the same time *Njuri* was faced with the challenge from the semi-westernized teachers, derogatorily referred to as *Njuri e-kauku* (meaning 'Njuri of the book') who, due to the pressure from the colonial government, were allowed, though of an inferior status, to "attend its deliberations on certain questions if those Christians were sworn on the Bible to secrecy on each occasion".³

At the same time, the ex-soldiers were returning home; in 1946 alone, 1425 were demobilized.⁴ In the following year, they defied forced labour and through a concerted effort, they managed to rouse the people whose apparent acquiescence had beguiled the authorities into believing that they were incapable of violent resistance. The ex-soldiers' influence now prompted them to "near civil disobedience". The District Commissioner (D.C) reports that:

² Annual Report, 1912-13 in DC/MRU/1/1, p.7.

³ See Annual Report 1950 in DC/MRU/1/4.

⁴ Annual Report 1946 in DC/MRU/1/4.

...There were several set-backs during the year due mainly to the returning soldiers who refuse to take part in this work (communal labour) and endeavour to prevent their wives from doing so.⁵

As feelings began to run high, escalating the pressure occasioned by the need to rid the district of all the non-Meru (foreign) residents, the already strained relations with the Kikuyu, who were beginning to use the Meru region as an extension area, were exacerbated. From then on, particular emphasis was laid on getting rid of the foreigners residing in the district. They were seen as "parasites on the Meru soil" as my informant, one of the returnees, put it. Among the Meru, the use of double-edged imagery is a highly developed art and an integral part of ordinary speech. The use of the analogy of "parasite" to describe the foreigners is a powerful image; not only does it illustrate their parasitic nature as seen from their hosts' point of view, but also the latter's restiveness. The Meru felt that they were playing host to all the non-Meru residents who were, apparently sucking the life out of them.

The general feeling at this time was that if nothing was done, the situation would get out of hand. The newly formed societies and associations embarked on serious propaganda, calling on the people to resist both the cultural and political domination, and return to their "glorious past".⁶ The resultant tension now sent shock waves through the sections of the Muslim community. As for the Kikuyu, they could always return to their places of origin. But what about the Swahili, the Nubians and their descendants? The need to maintain separate identity had, all along, inspired them to insulate themselves against the host society and now, this very identity was, in retrospect, working against them. The prevailing

⁵ Annual Report 1949 in DC/MRU/1/4.

⁶ J. T. S. Kamunchuluh, 1975:197.

sentiments were articulated by one of these returnees in the following words:

My father was a young man when Kangangi, Edward Butler Horne, came to Meru and he witnessed the atrocities that were perpetrated by Kangangi with the help of Swahili in the K.A.R. People were massacred ruthlessly and their property was plundered. When these foreigners came, they thought that the Meru were backward *washenzi* without any idea of religion. They despised us. I will tell you - it is like someone coming to your house and taking possession of everything in it, including you, the owner, so you have no say in whatever he does. This is what these people - the Europeans together with the Indians and the Waswahil did to us. This oppression continued unabated for years, but thanks to the Second World War, after which the situation began to change.

I was conscripted into the army and served until the war ended in 1945. While there, I learnt many things, my eyes were opened to the reality of the relationship between the African and the European - I discovered that the white man was an enemy. The foreigners in Meru were his associates who supported the administration in various ways: the Indian kept the shops and thus controlled and manipulated the supply of goods; the Swahili and others used their religion (Islam) to disgrace us - remember that we were regarded as *washenzi wasio na dini*, (that is) uncivilized and without religion. These were fellow Africans but because they had picked up a few habits from the coastal Arabs, they arrogated to themselves a higher social status than the rest of the people.

In fact it was at this time that I came to know that some of these people had worked for the Arabs and indeed that was how they had acquired their religion. It was at this time that, with a number of other ex-soldiers, I began to work covertly among our people in order to inspire them to rise up against the foreign elements that had set themselves in our midst. Remember the saying that *kikulacho ki nguoni mwako*. We made it clear to the people that unless something was done, the Swahili would persist in treating us with contempt and our daughters would continue to abscond to Mjini (town) where they became prostitutes. You know that prostitution was unheard of in Meru before the people founded their Majengo with its *mitaa*, and all that came to be associated with it. They enticed our women with rice and sugar. My own sister, Habiba left home and went to Mjini when she was about 18, later on she got married to Abdallah. We felt that we could not take these insults any more. Is it fair for someone to take control of your own house and then treat you like dirt? The white man, brought these people together with the Christian

missionaries and they all rendered him a faithful service. But we were not going to remain an ignorant lot of *washenzi* that they thought we were for ever, it was time to change our situation. You know the saying that 'God helps those who help themselves'.⁷

M'Tuanjau and many others like him were conscripted into an army to fight for a king and country they knew nothing about. In the course of his service in various places, he becomes reasonably exposed to new ideas, and hence his argument is well articulated - he links the current events with the arrival of the first colonial administrator in Meru; and sees the foreign cultures, that is Islam and Christianity, and even the Asian traders, as instruments of oppression. He goes further to interpret the Swahili disdain for the others as cultural domination. The central point of his argument is summed in the saying that *kikulacho ki nguoni mwako*. This literally means 'that which bites you is in your clothes', but the real meaning is that the greater enemy is the one from within. The enemy from without is known and therefore easily dealt with, but an enemy who is within is much more dangerous because he strikes, just as the metaphor says, from within. In this case, it is easier to deal with the Europeans, Asians and other foreigners, but the situation is complicated by individuals like Habiba, his sister and other *mahaji* who, in his opinion, had joined the ranks of the enemy. Later on, as we shall see, the *mahaji* tried to exculpate themselves from this charge by reviving the Jumuia-tul-Baladia, a nationalist association formed by the *mahaji* Muslims in old Pangani, Nairobi in the mid 1930s.

Besides political consciousness, the returnees also had acquired new tastes and habits, therefore, a large number of them preferred to establish themselves in or around the town rather than return to their villages. Though the available statistical evidence does not expressly show the

⁷ Interview with M'Tuanjau, Kangeta, 17th October 1991.

distribution of these returnees, it is evident from both the annual reports⁸ and the personal accounts given by a number of them during the interviews, that at least one half of the war returnees settled in or around the town. Others, with the skills obtained in the army, tried various trades in the rural trade centres in other parts of the district, from where they were able to establish links with their counterparts in the town.⁹

It is evident that a network was now evolving and in 1948 these nationalistic tendencies began to manifest themselves through societies and associations mushrooming all over the district. Of particular relevance is the Kianjai Connection Traders Association, formed in 1948 in Tigania.¹⁰ This association, which the District Commissioner describes as being "undoubtedly flavoured with politics and provides a convenient cloak for such activities"¹¹ soon came to represent a strong clique of traders and a few others who considered themselves 'enlightened'. They formed a class of their own, outside the orbit of the government employees. These people were ex-soldiers, and not the 'ignorant *washenzi*' that the Muslims considered the others to be. They were able to stand apart and as a result of their experiences, were able to articulate the nationalist ideology and propaganda. Clearly, they were well above the average Meru people.

Prior to this, the majority of the Muslims lived in their settlements, without any serious threat from a few individuals who tried to establish themselves in the town either as traders or as employees of the government. As I previously stated, these ex-soldiers were not just another lot of 'ignorant *washenzi*' that the Muslims could easily dismiss as ineffectual. To

⁸ Annual Report, 1946, DC/MRU/1/4.

⁹ Interview with M'Tuanjau, Kangeta 10th October 1991.

¹⁰ J. T. S. Kamunchuluh, 1975:196.

¹¹ Annual Report 1948, DC/MRU/1/4.

the Muslims, they constituted a more dangerous form of *ushenzi*, they not only idolized the Meru customs but also popularized an aggressive propaganda against foreign religions and culture which they saw as a form of domination by foreigners. Therefore, the preponderance of these 'enlightened' yet non-Muslim, ex-soldiers evidently upset the balance between the 'civilized' and the 'uncivilized'. In the previous situation it was

at least certain that the great majority of Africans holding any position of authority in the reserve are mission-trained and under strong missionary influence.¹²

That is, the people who considered themselves or were considered by others to be enlightened, were the few semi-westernized missionary-educated teachers and government employees who were all Christian and therefore, posed no real threat to the Muslims. But they were now caught in the cross-fire of the *Mau Mau*. The Muslims had endeavoured to maintain distinctiveness, especially the 'supercilious' Nubians, but the returnees began to undermine the basis of this distinctiveness, namely, the status derived from association with the colonial authority reinforced by *dini*, (Islam). The activities of these returnees culminated in the *Mau Mau* nationalism which shook the very foundations of the colonial administration itself. The protection in which the Muslims had been basking until now was replaced by insecurity as a result of the animosity generated by the *Mau Mau* movement. This point is illustrated below in the discussion on the demolition of the old Swahili village.

The important issues at the root of the growing antagonism towards those who failed to conform to the *Mau Mau* during this period, are aptly summed up in the following notice placed at the entrance to the Meru Teachers' Training College in August 1952:

¹² Mr. Gerald Casey of Beale Farm, Timau, to Mrs. Barbara Castle, M.P., October 1957, CO 822/1240.

May any African woman or man who drinks European beer die like this dog. May any African woman who sleeps with a European, an Indian or an Arab die like this dog. May any woman of our country who prostitutes herself to an African for money die like this dog. May any person who sells our lands to a European die like this dog." (Mau Mau notice No.4 Kenya Swahili part)"The British Empire upset like this dog...Rulers who sell black people or any person who sells black skin die like this!!! Our freedom rise now". (Mau Mau notice No.4. Kikuyu part).¹³

Indeed, this notice written in Kiswahili, Kikuyu and Kimeru, and strategically placed for all to read, emphasized the core issues namely: prostitution, sale of land, domination by foreigners, and betrayal. Land was the key issue of the *Mau Mau* movement - freedom fighters were fighting to get back the alienated land, and land and freedom/independence were intimately linked. The relationship between the land and the people was presented in the African traditional religious symbolism:

the concepts of land, God, and Kikuyu political identity were thus symbolically fused together in the prophetic ideology of the nationalist movement.¹⁴

The notice warned that: those who sell out (those who sell black skin) will die. A key feature of this notice is the emphasis on the relationship of women with the races that are named. Such relationships have to be severed; violation of this notice went with an attendant warning of impending death. That is to say that the potency of the curse is inevitably retributive.¹⁵

¹³ J. S. T. Kamunchuluh, 1973:193, citing Annual Report 1952, DC/MRU/8

¹⁴ B. C. Ray, 1976:168.

¹⁵ The power of curse and its functions as an instrument of social control have been discussed above, see pp. 111-114.

Nevertheless, during the initial days of the *Mau Mau* outbreak, Meru nationalism was in inverse proportion to that of Nyeri and Murang'a. As will be shown here, Meru nationalism was sustained at a simmering level for many years while the rest of the country, especially Nyeri and Murang'a, was writhing under the *Mau Mau* movement, only to gain momentum during the closing years of 1950s and the early 1960s. There are two plausible explanations for this state of affairs: first, the already mentioned form of indirect-rule that was sustained through the use of the indigenous institution of *njuri*¹⁶ led the Meru to cherish the illusion that they were autonomous. Secondly, is the fact that, except for the Buuri plains, not much of the land in Meru had been taken for white settlers and therefore not many people were displaced. Hence the relative lack of political ferment and nationalist consciousness, a subject that will be dealt with in the next section.

The Predicament of Sheikh Mwinyi

The effect of the war returnees on the Muslims varied from one group to another, that is from the *mahaji* on the one hand to the Swahili on the other. While M'Tuanjau (cited in the above interview) articulates the prevailing anti-Swahili sentiments in the words of an enlightened ex-soldier and nationalist, the case of Sheikh Mwinyi below, illustrates the predicament of the Swahili Muslims in Meru during this period. The sheikh narrated his life history thus:

My father was a soldier in K.A.R. and after the war he settled here and married from Abothanja clan. My mother lived here, on this very plot where I have built my house. At the peak of the *Mau Mau* movement, there was a widespread feeling among the local people that the "foreign elements" in this village should leave the area

¹⁶ See H. E. Lambert on the use of indigenous institutions in administration in Meru, LAM/1/2/1-9, University of Nairobi Jomo Kenyatta Memorial Library Archives.

together with the Kikuyu. I was then a teacher at the *madrassa* and I began to feel that it was unfair for these people to say that we should leave the district and go where our fathers came from. I began to think that though my father had always talked of going back, he actually had no place to go back to. He had settled and established himself here in Meru and now he was too old to move anywhere else. My father always said that he had some relatives in Unyamwezi in Tanganyika, but I have never met any of them. I never even came to know their names, except my grandfather's which I have taken for my surname. Now, due to *Mau Mau* influence these people began to call us foreigners. Some Nubian families convinced that an imminent danger faced them, left around 1952 to join their relatives in Kibera, Nairobi. I do not remember the names of all of them, but I can count 15 houses which I know were sold out at that time to other people.

For me and others like me, it was not a question of choice either to leave or stay, we belonged here and we were here to stay. But for us the *Mau Mau* people developed a strong hatred, they saw us as traitors to the freedom cause because we did not care for the land. You know that we Muslims are town people and it is only recently, after independence, that many of us have acquired pieces of land. How could I own land and I did not belong to any clan at that time. My mother, as I have said comes from Abothanja clan, but as you know, I cannot belong to my mother's clan. As for my father, having left his place as a young boy, did not even remember the name of his clan back in Unyamwezi. My maternal uncle had given my mother a small portion of land to cultivate, but even she could not lay any claim to this piece of land. Had my uncles been religious (Muslim) people, their sister would be entitled to some inheritance, but you also know that according to the Meru customs, she could not inherit any land from her father. In fact during this period, many Muslim women who had obtained small pieces of land from their relatives for cultivation were forced to give them up. The people were now complaining that the Swahili were no good - they supported the colonialists who are responsible for their presence in the area. Anyway, to cut a long story short, this was a bad time for us in this town. It was at this time that I moved to Igembe and married my first wife from Yusuf's family and settled there.¹⁷

¹⁷ Interview with Sheikh Mwinyi, Mjini, 16th November 1991.

The case of Sheikh Mwinyi highlights the effects of the *Mau Mau* on the Muslims in Meru. The reality of the situation was that they were not in transit as their fathers had made them believe all along. For the first time they realized that 'foreignness' to which undue emphasis had all along been attributed, especially by the ex-soldiers, was now turning sour for them and more so for their descendants. This realization came as a shock to them. All the while they had continued to look down on the rest of the Meru people as *washenzi*, "backward people without religion", but now it dawned on them that the threat facing them was immense. Their very existence was threatened and there were not many alternatives open to them.

The main points of this case can be situated in the wider perspective of *dini* versus *ushenzi*: it is clear that the sheikh blamed his "rootlessness" in Meru to the fact that he could not belong to his mother's clan; his uncles were not religious, they were *washenzi* and therefore their sister had no right to land inheritance though she herself was a Muslim. To him, her Muslim identity was being threatened by her 'uncivilized' brothers who denied her what was otherwise legally hers. He also blamed this on the local customs of lineage that demanded that he belong to his father's and not his mother's clan.

The idea of the rest of the people was that these foreigners should leave the country. For all those years that they have been around, there had been no attempt to confront them, but now the opportunity presented itself in the struggle for independence. The people were particularly incensed by the practice of prostitution attributed to the Muslim settlements in the town. The Kianjai Trade Connection Association mentioned earlier on claimed that one of its major aims was to fight prostitution and those responsible for it must leave the district.

Attacks on government servants started early in 1952 in Nyeri and spread to Murang'a and, as we are informed:

The attacks have in the main been directed against chiefs and head men but the junior government servants such as chiefs' messengers and clerks, agricultural instructors, teachers... and loyal Africans in general have also suffered.¹⁸

Not only were the Muslims among the 'loyal' Africans, but, as I have mentioned above, there was rancour against them. The *Mau Mau* movement was opposed to all foreign religions and culture. Commenting on the religious aspect of the movement, the Governor spoke of the:

recent attacks by the Mau Mau on the Christian faith which have resulted in the absolute condemnation of the society by the Protestant and Catholic churches. In July a church in Fort Hall District (now Murang'a district) was desecrated by the slaughter of a goat before the altar; in August the removal of a portrait of Christ from a school in Nyeri District was demanded on the grounds that 'He was an enemy of the people'; Members of the society are not allowed to use Christian names...¹⁹

The *Mau Mau* propaganda against foreign religions was interpreted as the "irreligious character of the movement" by the Christian leadership in a pastoral letter to the Catholic Bishops:

10. It has recently come to light that the movement is assuming a definite anti-Christian attitude and policy. This religious side of the present state of things is for us most essential and an aspect of the movement which eminently concerns us by reason of the office which we hold. We have many proofs of this tendency... On personal testimony the victim said: 'I was told that if I contribute any money for the churches...if I walked with religious people and if I read the Bible, and if I am called by a baptismal name and if I reveal any of this *kiama* to the government then the things they were

¹⁸ Proposals to Deal With Disturbances Arising From the Activities of the *Mau Mau*, CO 822/437.

¹⁹ Governor's statement on the proposal to deal with the disturbance arising from the Mau Mau secret society, Co 822/437.

giving me would kill me.' This fact reveals the aim of the association in clear terms; it gives a direct clue to the type of social and political order...the Mau Mau is preparing for its people.

11. But other evidence of still a more malicious and blasphemous nature has come to our notice; the kind of propaganda which aims at the complete overthrow and denial of all religion. This phase in the development of this proscribed society constitutes, in our opinion, its greatest evil because it attacks and endeavours to destroy the religion of Christ...²⁰

Though in these extracts, both the government and the Christian missionaries emphasize the attacks on the Christians: Mau Mau was anti-foreign, anti-Christian and anti-Muslim. Attacks on people of other religions were documented only when they were perpetrated against "non-Natives", even isolated incidents were reported to the Governor, for instance, it is reported that:

An Asian mother strangled and her house ransacked. The attempted abduction of an Asian child...The brutal murder of an Asian trader and slashing of his wife and children; and an armed attack on an Asian trading centre.²¹

Though these reports on attacks make no mention of Meru Muslims, the available evidence shows that they were not spared by the nationalists. My informants related gruesome experiences in which they lost their loved ones and their property. One Swahili woman tearfully narrated how her son and husband were murdered for allegedly being anti-*Mau Mau*.²² Another one explained how she woke up one morning to find her husband's

²⁰ Pastoral letter from John J McCarthy, C.S.Sp., Titular Bishop of Cercina and Vicar Apostolic of Zanzibar, to the Bishop's house, Nairobi. 26/8/1952, CO 822/438.

²¹ Sir Everlin Baring to Secretary of state for the Colonies, 29/12/1952 CO 822/465.

²² Interview with Mwanaidi, Mjini, 15th November 1991.

dismembered body at the doorstep. There are numerous such cases and the list could be much longer. It is important to note that the residents of the old Swahili village and the Nubian Village suffered more than the *mahaji* because they were considered to be foreigners and therefore, it was not possible for them to take the *Mau Mau* oath which earned them acceptance by the nationalists and protection against harassment. The oath was administered to the indigenous people in order to flush out the foreign elements in their midst. The severity of persecution suffered by this group could be attributed to the avowed condemnation of the *Mau Mau* by the Muslim leadership and its support for the government's ruthless measures and blind determination to stamp out the movement. The Muslim support for the government against the *Mau Mau* is evident in the following extract:

The governor interviewed... the Asian members both Hindu and Muslim...The Assistant Liwali of Mombasa and Mukima (Mukamba) signified agreement. All Asians I met, who included Arab elected members, two Hindus, Ebrahim (Ismailia)...expressed strong agreement and satisfaction.

Furthermore,

Dr. Hassan, Muslim elected member of the Legislative council addressing his constituents in Mombasa, referred to the emergency measures and said 'I feel it my duty to support the government in these unpalatable but essential measures in order to strengthen its hand'.²³

The Liwali in Mombasa was the traditional administrator and leader of Muslims, and the coast, as has been said in chapter 2, provided inspiration and served as the model for the Muslim communities living far inland, Meru included. Therefore, such official pronouncements, made by leading Muslims, reflected the general attitude of Muslims which rekindled intense

²³ Position of the Asian Community in Kenya During the Emergency, CO 822/465.

antagonism in Meru with the result that attacks on Asians, Swahili and Nubians became more frequent.

Demolition of the Swahili Village

At the height of these attacks in 1954/55, the old Swahili village in Meru town was demolished. It was clear that the village was demolished in accordance with the long standing town planning scheme:

To get more land to build and extend the New Bazaar Area, it was necessary to remove the Swahili village to another site within the township. Council decided to build them houses and supplied various materials. The expenditure was therefore borne from 'compensation for disturbance vote'. The provision made in 1954 estimates is inadequate to meet timber bills. To complete these buildings it will require additional expenditure of £90. Plot holders pay annual rent to the council.²⁴

However, there is evidence to suggest that the impetus to implement the scheme at this time was provided by the *Mau Mau* movement. My informants gave various accounts of how and why they were moved to the "New Swahili village" adjoining the Nubian village. Mzee Ibrahim, of whom previous mention has been made, said that the Swahili could not be moved to Majengo because the *mahaji* had bought the piece of land for themselves. He happily added that now it was the turn for the *mahaji* to reject the Swahili:

²⁴ In February 1949, it was reported that "some 34 shops built of temporary materials comprise the Asian commercial lines, the whole lot constitute a statutory nuisance and contravene the...regulations of the Township Ordinance;...there will be at some not too distant date a development plan for Meru township which will eliminate the existing unsavoury conditions and in turn set up on modern lines another Asiatic business area." Private survey for building plots was started in 1953 and by 1957 most buildings were completed and the demolition of the old bazaar commenced. Meru Township File, DC/MRU/2/9/2. Also see the Supplementary estimates of Meru African District Council, 1955. Unclassified, Meru Municipal Council Chambers.

After all, we have not changed (our status). They considered themselves to be *waungwana* and referred to us derogatorily as *dewe* (pierced then stretched earlobes). When we were in need, they did not welcome us to their settlement, and now that it is broken, they turn to us. Are we not the same *mahaji* that they despised?²⁵

Thus the initial proposal to move them to Majengo was rejected on the very grounds that the *mahaji* were rejected nearly 30 years before. Ibrahim's statement indicates that the old rivalries were still lingering. Nonetheless, there were other plausible reasons for not moving them to Majengo, regardless of the availability of space there and acceptability by the *mahaji*. First, it was deemed expedient by the colonial administration to curb *Mau Mau* activities by all means, therefore, putting these two groups together would defeat the purpose especially because the *mahaji* were members of Jumuia-tul-Baladia, and some of them had already taken the oath binding them to the *Mau Mau* movement. Second, the move to create for them a new Swahili village can be seen as part of the villagization which was at this time being introduced elsewhere in the country.²⁶ The majority of the evacuees that I interviewed, attributed the destruction of the old Swahili village and the transfer to the new site, to the *Mau Mau* disturbances.²⁷

During a meeting with the elders, the District Commissioner explained that the Swahili were being moved in order to protect them from *Mau Mau* harassment. But they were herded together and the whole area

²⁵ Interview with Mzee Ibrahim, Majengo, 26th August 1991.

²⁶ Villagization was first introduced in Kikuyuland after the colonial war council met in 1954 and decided that it was the most effective way to control the *Mau Mau*. People were herded into huge enclosures, and home-guards kept a twenty-four hour vigil to monitor the movement of the residents, and ensure that no food was given to the freedom fighters in the forest.

²⁷ Interview with Mwanaidi, Mjini, 20th November 1991; Karimi, Mjini, 26th of November 1991; and Mzee Hamisi, Mjini 27th November 1991.

cordoned off, making them virtual prisoners, as one informant put it. This constriction, coupled with a twenty-four-hour vigil by home-guards, generated its own force - compelling the Muslims to pray in the mosque nearest to them, that is the Nubi mosque, since they were allowed to go out only for an hour in the afternoon to perform the prayers and buy food. This state of emergency triggered a process of reconciliation between the Swahili and the Nubians. They realized that sustaining their cleavages and rivalries was of no use in solving their immediate problem for should the *Mau Mau* succeed, and the colonial administration collapse, the immediate substitute would be power in the hands of people who have been agitating for the expulsion of the Swahili and other foreigners from the area.

The evacuation was devastating. In addition to the *Mau Mau* threat, the administration overrode both groups' religious sensibilities by putting them together in what was now designated the "New Swahili Village". They were not allowed any say on the issue and, contrary to the council minutes and the D.C.'s promise, no compensation for disturbance was forthcoming in spite of various deputations to the D.C. The council minutes indicate that houses were to be built on the new site by the council for the people in question, but a number of my informants who were themselves victims of the demolition, say that only a half of the houses were constructed by the council, and the other half by the owners with little help from the council.²⁸ It should also be noted that when the original houses were destroyed, some of the house-owners who had either bought or inherited the houses from relatives, were now considered ineligible for plots on the new site and this had tremendous effects on the social setup of the settlement, as will be illustrated below. An examination of the reasons and arguments

²⁸ The District Annual Medical Officer of Health Reports show that Swahili village had 29 houses. Perhaps there might have been more houses since the settlement was congested, but the process of acquiring a plot on which to build a house was rather tedious; and even then only certain people were eligible for these plots. It should also be remembered that the "out houses" were not registered with the council and for that reason, they are not included in the reports.

given by the applicants for plots in the new Swahili village, shows that previous ownership of a house in the old village and service to the government were the most important criteria for resettlement:

priority is being given to persons already resident in the old Swahili village. Should any land be available when present residents in the Swahili village are re-housed, further applications may be entertained...²⁹

In pursuance of this council minute, many persons lost their houses and were thus turned into lodgers, a loss that had both economic and social implications for the members of the community. From the economic point of view, each house provided accommodation for a number of individuals or even families. At the same time, a house was an important and sometimes sole source of income for its owner. Also, over the years, the lodgers came to constitute a separate class of residents, making the social structure of the Swahili settlement quite complex. The outhouses and the rooms which were let out to them, served as bases for the various trades for most of them.

Socially, it was important for one to own a house in the town for it was a source of high status, though, in a different sense from the coastal setup that Allen describes.³⁰ These house owners may be seen as "the long-established town dwellers" of Meru. But, in contrast to the coastal *ungwana* where status hinged on "stone house culture" and "creditworthiness and financial integrity", house ownership and its attendant social status in Meru, hinged on service to colonial government. At the coast, lineage defined the core groups while in Meru, lineage was not a factor in the formation of a core group. The house owners formed an inner circle, which functioned as the core, the reference group from which *wazee wa mji*,

²⁹ DC/MRU/2/4/10. From the President of Meru African District Council, 22/3/1954.

³⁰ J. de V. Allen 1980:306-335.

leading elders, were constituted.³¹ Therefore, loss of a house to one of them entailed exclusion from this core. The option of becoming a lodger was entirely unacceptable, entailing all of this and signifying a downward step, a loss of social status. It should also be remembered that most of these men and women could not find an alternative source of income, therefore, even those who were willing to lodge with their neighbours, could not afford the rent. Several families were forced to seek refuge with relatives and friends.

While the evacuation was devastating for the victims the demolition marked a new phase in the development of Islam in Meru. Not only did the Muslims realize the futility of sustained cleavages and rivalries, but it became quite impractical to sustain these differences now that the two groups are virtually merged after the demolition. It can be said that this was the beginning of the process which culminated in different identities being blurred, as group distinctiveness began to dissipate, giving way to a culturally constructed Muslim identity in the town.

The Resurgence of Jumuia-tul-Baladia

The interesting point for our purpose here is that initially *Mau Mau* activity in Meru was low key when compared to Nyeri and Murang'a. But towards the end of the 1950s, when such activity was beginning to subside in other parts of the country, it gained momentum in Meru. Commenting on the resurgence of *Mau Mau* oathing in Meru, the director of intelligence observed that:

The present outbreak (of oathing) has more serious implications. Oathing has been taking place at the probable rate of two or three small ceremonies a week since September 1957 and it is known that eighteen ceremonies have taken place. In every known case violence or intimidation was used to compel the initiates to take the oath...

³¹ For the discussion on the role of the elders in the social and religious affairs of Majengo, see chapter 5, pp.226-234.

The administrators were always armed with pangas and the rituals used were typical Mau Mau with local Meru embellishments.³²

The available evidence suggests that this resurgence precipitated the revival of the Jumuia-tul-Baladia in Meru. That is to say that the revival of Jumuiatul-Baladia in Meru at that time can be seen as the Muslim response to the *Mau Mau*. By 1952, a group of *mahaji* had small pieces of land which they cultivated for subsistence at a place called Naari, a few miles away from Meru town. Naari area was apparently attractive for settlement, so they constructed a mosque and a number of them were considering the possibility of moving from Majengo to found a new Muslim village there. But the oath-taking outburst was executed with a frightening vigour, forcing them to withdraw from the new-found land. The very presence of Swahili and other Muslims in Meru Town was bad enough, and now allowing them to establish another Majengo in Naari and living in close proximity with them, was seen as a betrayal of the nationalist cause. A number of my informants who had moved to Naari narrated how the *Mau Mau* oath administrators pulled down the wattle-and-thatch mosque and sent them fleeing back to Majengo. The revival of *Mau Mau* in Meru was animated by the idea "that to catch up with the rest of the country oath-taking was necessary".³³

³² Ag. Governor to the Secretary of State for Colonies, "Mau Mau Oathing ceremonies in Meru", 24/1/1958, CO 822/1254.

³³ It has been mentioned earlier on that during the initial days, there was relatively less bitterness in Meru as a result of the form of in-direct rule that was sustained through the use of *njuri*, hence the belated political consciousness, see Ag. Governor to the Secretary of State for Colonies, "Mau Mau Oathing ceremonies in Meru", 24/1/1958, CO 822/1254.

One can see a link between this resurgence of oathing and the revival of Jumuia-tul-Baladia by the Majango residents, the *mahaji*, all of whom owed allegiance to the movement since its inception.³⁴

On the origin of Jumuia-tul-Baladia in Nairobi, Nzibo has the following to say:

Jumuia-tul-Baladia was formed as a result of the Kikuyu mahaji's dissatisfaction with the way they were dominated and kept in ignorance by the Coastal Waswahili. Its leader Maalim Hamisi Ngige...found (*sic*) his own madrassah to promote Islam among the mahaji who by 1930 had become frustrated by the little Islamic knowledge they possessed and the exclusive domination of Islamic affairs by the coastal people. Many rejected the term *hajji* as discriminatory and despised the patronizing attitude of the coastal Muslims.³⁵

It may be argued that Nzibo's explanation is an oversimplification of a more complex phenomenon which culminated in the formation of Jumuia-tul-Baladia by the *mahaji* in the old Muslim settlement of Panagani, Nairobi. However, the relevant point here is that after the demolition of Pangani, the association opened branches in various places where there were *mahaji* communities: Karai in Kiambu, Nakuru, Embu, Meru, etc., with Nyeri as the headquarters. In its hey-day under the leadership of Hajji Hamisi, the society became engrossed in the propagation of Islam among the Africans in the interior, the construction of mosques (14 mosques are listed under its achievements up to 1973)³⁶, promotion of Muslim education, and other

³⁴ Interview with Mwanaisha, Majengo, 24th October 1991.

³⁵ Y. A. Nzibo, 1986:127.

³⁶ Minutes of the meeting of Jumuia-tul-Baladia held on 18/1/1973 in Nyeri (Minutes given to me by one of the Baladia leaders in Meru). The society claims to have been founded much earlier than 1937, but we have no other evidence of its existence prior to this date. Its achievements are mainly the construction of mosques and madrasa in Ngong, Karai, Riruta, Thika, Murang'a, Sagana, Kutus, Embu, Nyeri, Nanyuki, Meru, Nakuru and Makindu.

activities considered vital for the improvement of the lot of *mahaji* Muslims. Faced with scarcity of funds and lack of effective national leadership, the society achieved a limited measure of success.

In Meru, prior to the tidal wave of oathing orchestrated by nationalists, song and dance performed during the Muslim calendrical festivities served as conduits through which the sentiments of the members of Jumuia-tul-Baladia and the antagonism and rivalry between the various groups were expressed.³⁷ What we now see as voluntary oathing by those had been left out; and the severity of their criticism of those disinclined to take the oath, is an almost fanatical attempt to make up for the lost time. The case of Ruring'u Muslim village in Nyeri, which was razed to the ground at the climax of the *Mau Mau* struggle,³⁸ now provided the inspiration; if the Ruring'u victims were going to be rewarded after independence, so should those in Meru. Thus the Jumuia-tul-Baladia provided the blue-print for Muslim participation in rituals which the Director of Intelligence describes as "typically *Mau Mau* with local Meru embellishments".³⁹ He does not say what these embellishments were, but the oathing process undoubtedly involved handling of blood and the use of other items which are strictly forbidden for Muslims.

One informant who could not, understandably divulge the details of the oath to me, said that the Muslims partook of a special oath acceptable to them, but again it is difficult to gauge their compliance to the prescribed

³⁷ Song and dance as a means of expressing the rivalry that existed between the groups has been alluded to in chapter 2, pp. 83-84.

³⁸ Residents of Ruringu Muslims village in Nyeri were suspected to be members or sympathizers of the *Mau Mau* movement and their village was razed to the ground in 1955, leaving only the mosque untouched. Interview with Ramadhan, Chuka, 23rd November 1991.

³⁹ Ag. Governor to the Secretary of State for Colonies, "Mau Mau Oathing Ceremonies in Meru", 24/1/1958, CO 822/1254.

oath; or to specify the point at which they drew the line between *halal* and *haram* in the oathing rituals. When asked why in the first place they as Muslims assented to oathing of whatever form, some said that the *Mau Mau* movement was a movement by the 'people of the land' and the *mahaji*, therefore, had no reason to remain aloof. Be that as it may, a more appropriate explanation for their participation would be the degree of insecurity generated by the great passion with which the compulsory oathing⁴⁰ was being executed by the nationalists. While, then, it can be said that the conscious harassment targeted at them was partly responsible for their participation, there are parallels in Murang'a and Nyeri which seem to lend credibility to the suggestion that in partaking of the oath, they were asserting national group loyalty over religious loyalty.

The he-goat (*nthenge*) oath, described as the "second most powerful Kikuyu oath" by the then Director of Intelligence, was said to be

'planted' on the proposed victim in the form of a dead dog, cat or chicken to which is affixed a notice telling him what he may or may not do and detailing the agonies he will suffer should he dare to disregard the oath... As a result, a large number of potentially loyal government servants and others have seen no alternative but to take the Mau Mau oath. They have gone in fear of their lives, brutal murder of their families and destruction of their property...⁴¹

This description of the he-goat oath fits the description of the notice placed at the entrance to the Meru Teachers College mentioned above. What

⁴⁰ Reporting on compulsory oathing in Meru, the Director of Intelligence wrote that "The present outbreak (of oathing) has more serious implications. Oathing has been taking place at the rate of two to three small ceremonies a week since September 1957 ... In every known case violence or intimidation was used to compel the initiates to take oath...", Ag. Governor to the Secretary of State for Colonies, "Mau Mau Oathing ceremonies in Meru", 24/1/1958, CO 822/1254

⁴¹ CO 822/437 Proposal to Deal With Disturbance Arising From the Activities of the Mau Mau Secret Society in Kenya.

emerges at this point is a conscious manipulation of the age-old belief in the efficacy of curses by the activists to coerce people into taking the oath; hence many *mahaji* took the oath to eschew the attendant consequences of failure to support the *Mau Mau*. From the foregoing discussion, it is clear that resurgence of Jumuia-tul-Baladia was first and foremost the *mahaji* response to the *Mau Mau*. Two important elements of this response were: the need to catch up in case of reward after the fruition of the *Mau Mau* struggle; and the need for protection and mutual trust that the oath guaranteed for its partakers. This protection was crucial to *mahaji* Muslims now that the call for foreigners to leave the area was becoming even louder towards the closing years of the 1950s and the early 1960s.

However, it was not possible for the Meru people to get rid of all the unwanted residents because some of them had already become deeply rooted in their midst. They only managed, by 1962, to procure a separate "Meru region" by protesting through the Meru African Coffee Cooperative Union, "representing 40,000 members"; "the Meru African District Council, representing 500,000 of all the Meru people"; and the Njuri, "to which all males over 30 are eligible"; all of which expressed "the Meru wish to be completely separated from the Kikuyu who try to dominate them and use their land as an expansion area. If they are not separated the Meru will use force."⁴²

Muslims and the 'Independence Scramble'

After the construction of the new bazaar between 1955 and 1960, and the attainment of independence in 1963, many other people began to move into Meru town. The economic prospects of the now enlarged town, coupled with the inspiration drawn from the newly acquired independence, lured

⁴² Kenya: Report of the Regional Boundaries Commission, Her Majesty's Stationary Office, London, 1962, p.55.

many new-comers into the town. The "independence and scramble" slogan, attributed to Bernard Mate, then Meru representative in the Legislative Council, became not only the slogan for the period, but also the rallying cry for acquisition of land and property in the district. There was a rush to "harvest the fruits of independence", but, as O'Brien observes, the advent of independence "found the Muslims all together confused and unprepared".⁴³ In Meru they had not prepared themselves for the eventualities of independence, one of which was the influx of outsiders into the town. As we have seen above priority in plot allotment in the New Swahili village had been given to the residents of the old village, and "applications from persons in the reserve to set up in the township"⁴⁴ were not considered even as late as 1954, but now such restrictions were no longer exercised.

Majengo had been a cultural island, the Muslims had lived for many years without external threat and hence busied themselves in articulating their differences. Now they were faced with an increasing number of non-Muslims, with many of them seeking and finding accommodation within the Muslim settlement itself. For the first time, they felt that there was an imperative need to stand up for their faith. Their cultural identity, moreover, must be able to stand the test of time and this could not be achieved without cohesion amongst themselves. The process of redefining religious status (of converts and those born in the faith) in order to dissolve the groups' religious and social boundaries and embrace all the Muslim elements in a newly constructed cohesive Muslim community in the town

⁴³ D. C. O'Brien, "Coping with Christians: The Muslim Predicament in Kenya", S.O.A.S. Islam in Africa Seminar Paper based on field research conducted from December 1986 to early February 1987, in Nairobi and Mombasa.

⁴⁴ Mr P. R. Spendlove (the District Commissioner) to the Reverend Valender, 4/3/1954, DC/MRU/2/4/10. Valender, the Methodist Church minister in Meru, made an application for some of his flock to set up in the new settlement, but the D.C objected on the grounds that persons in the reserve were not encouraged to move into the township, even as late as 1954.

will be examined below. The point to note here is that this influx of new comers living in close proximity to Muslims, constituted a social and religious threat. This threat became all the more apparent for the additional reason that the Muslims had, for a long time, insulated themselves from the rest of the society in an attempt to keep *dini* free from contamination by *ushenzi*, with the result that they had not availed themselves of the opportunity to obtain western education, which now seemed to confer an enviable advantage on the rest of the people. Needless to say this advantageous position gave them an upper hand over the Muslims.

So far, we have illustrated the effects of the *Mau Mau* on the Muslims in Meru. From the evidence assembled above, it is clear that the *Mau Mau* cataclysm triggered a chain of events, which provided an external stimulus for change. This process of change shook the Muslim fraternity out of its complacency, and they came to realize that future security for them would only be found in identifying with the *mahaji* descendants.

The Swahili and the Nubians were led by the events of the *Mau Mau* and its aftermath to realize that they could not hold out against the current of social change taking place in the region; and that it was in their best interests that they support and obtain the support of the apparently more secure *mahaji* and their descendants. They could no longer rely on the patronage of the colonial administration, the most appropriate course presented itself in a form of loose unity for the Muslim groups. On the other hand, a new basis for the necessary re-orientation of attitudes which would govern their future relationship had to be found. This was readily constructed in the ideology of *kuzaliwa katika dini*, 'born in the faith', which was charged with new dynamism.

The Mechanics of Religious Community Identity Construction

To 'Be Born in the Faith'

In the late 1950s through to the mid 1960s, the Muslim fraternity in Meru was experiencing what Cohen in his illuminating study of Sabon Gari in Nigeria, calls "structural" change,⁴⁵ though the Sabon Gari differ essentially from the Majengo in Kenyan towns in that the former are formed by people of the same ethnic group who migrate to cities in Nigeria. The Sabo function as bases for the control of trade in the south, hence their leaders and residents have an economic basis of power which the Majengo lack. In the previous chapter I discussed the social and religious cleavages in Meru, showing how the various Muslim groups endeavoured to maintain distinctiveness. It is this distinctiveness which was now shifting as the Muslim pioneers began to give way to the second generation.

It might be useful here to state Cohen's thesis in order to provide a framework for our discussion. Cohen examined the process of social organization in the Sabon Gari, 'the strangers' quarter', by showing the economic and political interdependence in the network of the Sabo residents, and their response to a changing political situation. He isolates six problems: the problem of distinctiveness, of communication, of decision-making, of authority, of ideology, and of discipline. In the first one, an ethnic group defines its separateness within the parameters of the prevailing political climate, by insulating itself against intrusion by members of other less privileged groups. Thus distinctiveness is achieved through the propagation of myths of origin and claims to superiority; and descent and endogamy. Kinship is crucial to the Sabo group membership, while intra-group interaction helps the group to deepen its distinctiveness.

⁴⁵ Abner Cohen, 1969:25.

This form of interaction is expedited by spatial proximity, which he argues, "can be an important auxiliary factor in the development of effective ethnic grouping".⁴⁶

Cultural homogenization is a requisite for resistance to external pressure in a situation where two or more ethnic groups are poised in a struggle. With regard to the problem of communication, distinctiveness alone does not transform a group into a polity, the development of a communications system among its members is also a necessary condition. Authority, Cohen's fourth problem, is vested in the old, socially well established settlers of the Sabo. He further argues that it is "political ideology which legitimates power and converts it to authority".⁴⁷ For ideology to function, certain beliefs must be inculcated and sustained through the conditioning of moods and attitudes of the individuals concerned. Following Turner, he says that the symbols must be charged with meanings which are situationally relevant.⁴⁸

Cohen takes as his starting point what he calls the "sociological paradox" of 'retribalization' and 'detribalization' taking place in African towns. In detribalization, an ethnic group tries to adjust itself to a new situation by adopting new customs which are shared with the contiguous groups. In retribalization, a group adjusts by accentuating their traditional customs, symbols and ideologies. It is the retribalization of the Sabo that is the concern of Cohen's study. His thesis is based on the assumption that the migrant ethnic group is retribalized in its attempt to articulate an informal political organization to be used in the struggle with the other groups. This analysis assumes that every ethnic group develops into a polity in a new political situation.

⁴⁶ Abner Cohen, 1969:204.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p.208.

⁴⁸ See V. Turner, 1967:28-30.

Conversely, the group in Meru town does not develop into a polity after independence. Therefore, it can be said that the social organization, that is, the customs, the religious symbols, ideologies and political structure, all have a great deal to do with how a group adjusts itself to a particular situation, be it political, religious, economic or a combination of two or all of these. Again, it should also be remembered that it is not only the past experiences that affect the response of an ethnic group, but also a particular situation may require a particular response. In other words the Hausa in the Sabo have a different historical experience from that of the Muslims in Majengo and Mjini in Meru and the political situation of the Hausa in the 1950s differs in several important respects from that of Meru.

Nevertheless, one can see a striking parallel between the two cases: in one, the "increasingly bureaucratized administration... no longer officially recognizes the Sabo as a Hausa Quarter"; in the other, the municipal agents of the independent African government do not consider Majengo and Mjini as exclusive settlements. Thus for both the Meru and the Hausa Muslims, the idea of regional distinctiveness comes to an abrupt end. Furthermore, the distinctiveness of the Meru Muslim settlements is seen as a colonial relic, incompatible with the ideals of independence. It is not my intention to make a detailed comparison between the Sabo Hausa and the Meru Muslims, though it would be interesting to do so. The point I want to make here is that, as a sociological model of analysis of a Muslim group, this study is highly illustrative. However, for it to fit the case in question, it needs to be altered significantly.

When the indirect rule in Nigeria collapsed with the resultant loss of the colonial support for the Sabo, the immediate threat facing the community was both political and economic, the two aspects of Sabo life being inextricable; whereas the threat in Meru was articulated in religious and cultural terms. Unlike the autonomous Sabo chief whose authority is backed up by political and economic power, the authority of the elders in

Majengo, though they constitute an indispensable body of authority to which the Muslims have recourse in any matter affecting them, has no political significance. Their lack of political power, for instance, was best demonstrated during the already mentioned transfer of the old Swahili village to a new site in 1954/55. After the demolition, they were bundled together in the new settlement, apparently without any resistance. Even when the authorities failed to comply with the terms of the transfer, such as compensation for disturbance and council help in the construction of new houses, the victims were unable to organize for political action. They could only send numerous deputations to the district administration, but these were soon to prove the most ineffective means of seeking redress for political grievances.

Religious orders in some parts of East Africa, have been the cornerstone for resistance of the pressure of colonial rule, and the development of other forms of nationalism,⁴⁹ but in Kenya their influence has been minimal. Along the coast, it is limited to the veneration of saints' tombs and the performance of *dhikr*, sufi meditations; while a more vigorous adherence to Qadiriyya and Salihyya orders is evident among the Somali.⁵⁰ In Meru town, only a small number of individuals owed allegiance to these orders.

It has been argued above that Muslims in Meru were not a polity, nevertheless, they had to reorganize themselves in a changing political situation. The question then is how they articulated the reorganization. They resorted to a dynamic re-arrangement of archetypal concepts and

⁴⁹ See B. G. Martin, 1976:172-176.

⁵⁰ In my study of the Muslim communities in Nairobi (Maingi, 1987:140-142) I found that after the assassination of one Sheikh Uways in 1909 for his attack on the venerated leader of Salihyya, Sheikh Abdallah Herse, (both men were of Somali origin) the adherents of the two orders were slaughtering one another in Nairobi up till the end of the First World War. However, the tension between them subsided only to be revived during the late 1950s and early 1960s to buttress the claims to the then simmering Somali nationalism.

ideals of birth in the faith, in order to realign relationships and create a basis for a new social setting. The significance of 'birth in the faith' is articulated by Sheikh Mwinyi, whose father was a Nyamwezi and therefore not one of the *mahaji*, thus:

The children of the *mahaji* are not *mahaji* themselves. Their fathers were converts. Even if they had become Muslim, they still retained some of their past (*ushenzi*) 'uncivilized' traits. It is true to say that they are now pilgrims (they have made pilgrimage from disbelief) but it is not easy for a person to change completely and forget the things one was accustomed to since childhood throughout until the attainment of adulthood. How could they (the *mahaji*) alter their condition? As you know a child or a human being is born a Muslim but it is the parents or the guardians who later on lead him or her in another direction. You know the saying that 'the way a child is raised is the way s/he grows'. Now the *mahaji*, in spite of the fact that they had made pilgrimage from disbelief, they were encumbered with many things of the past. But their children who have been born in this town, are not concerned with most of these things. Again these are lucky to get religious education in the madrasa here, and many are able to read the Book for themselves. Therefore, their faith is different (in terms of understanding and depth) than that of their fathers, a person who knows cannot be equal to one who does not know. In this respect, they are a step ahead of their fathers and therefore, they are not *mahaji*, they are born in the faith.⁵¹

The Sheikh's argument goes much further than whether birth in the faith is or is not superior to conversion; it is not simply a question of whether or not the *mahaji* descendants are different from the predecessors, but rather in what ways are they different. The index of differentiation between the *mahaji* and their descendants is the degree of Swahilization ascribed to the "religious" environment in which the latter have been raised. Thus the superiority of birth over conversion hinges crucially on the hidden agenda that there has been no contact with *ushenzi*, the notion of a truly Muslim identity, supposedly passed on from parents to children; and also accrued from every-day experiences in what the Sheikh regards as a culturally conducive atmosphere. The two categories of Muslims cannot be

⁵¹ Interview with Sheikh Mwinyi, Mjini, 16th November 1991.

equal: for the one 'Muslimness' is immanent; for the other, it is merely acquired through conversion. Accordingly, for those born in the faith, 'Muslimness' is an inherent quality deeply ingrained in their lives, unlike those who have merely acquired it through conversion and are, therefore, less likely to sustain it.

What needs emphasizing here is that the dichotomy between those born in the faith and the converts is based on the notion of inequality, that is the degree in depth and therefore in purity of faith varies between the two categories of believers. This point is brought out clearly by Sheikh Ahmed who says that those who know are not equal to those who do not know. We need not concern ourselves with the validity of this claim, but its ramifications are important: on the psychological level, it proves propitious for the *mahaji* descendants or those 'born in the faith' for they now feel elevated to a higher level than their fathers and hence equal to both the Swahili and the Nubians within the town. They do not have to seek acceptance as did their fathers by substituting the names of their god-fathers for their own surnames since they have acquired it through birth.⁵² Thus the notion of birth provides for both groups a basis for reorganization. What this means at this level is that the notion of birth, being the aggregate of the inherited religious qualities, is not only in harmony with

⁵² It has been shown in chapter 2 (p. 107) that during the early period, the converts were regarded as children of their 'religious fathers', god-fathers or patrons. The person who was responsible for the conversion of another was highly regarded. Sheikh Mwinyi, of whom previous mention has been made, once lamented that in those early days of ignorance, the converts had to take the names of their patrons in the belief that the god-fathers had now replaced their real fathers who were still "*katika hali ya ushenzi*", in an 'uncivilized'/'backward' condition. However, though the situation has changed, one's patron deserves respect that is due to them, for instance, one Friday afternoon, I was sitting in Mama Salwa's house, one of my informants in Kiengu. Five other women joined us for tea and each one of them brought food and other gifts to Fatuma. She said to me that the five women were her 'daughters', she was their patron and so they treat her as their mother. This woman is old and has no children of her own, but I observed she depends a great deal on these 'daughters' for help, which is always forthcoming.

the religious sensibilities of all the Muslim groups but must also serve to explicitly exclude the outsiders who are closing in on the Muslims in the town.

The converts for their part are expected to be more meticulous in their religious observance since they must struggle to rise above *ushenzi*. Once I visited a young woman who had been recently converted and her Muslim friends insisted that she always veil herself. When I inquired why they themselves are lax in their use of the veil, one of them argued that the convert is the one who should follow the religious prescriptions to the letter for two reasons: first, there is a change in their lives and this change should be made manifest for those who knew them before conversion should be able to recognize the change; second, there is a high risk of relapsing into *ushenzi* when one's faith is not deeply ingrained. In this case, her friends who could boast a higher (religious) status, felt that the possibility of losing their apparently inherited faith was rather remote. Similarly, the *mahaji* descendants felt secure as they would now be accepted on equal terms by their counterparts in the town.

At the time of the establishment of the Meru Muslim settlements and throughout the formative period, the Swahili made selective references to Islam in order to legitimate the claim to religious superiority of those born in the faith over converts. This putative superiority provided the basis for asserting distinct divisions between the Muslim groups. Nearly fifty years later, the process is being reversed, with the result that the same concept that was then used to legitimate distinctiveness is now being re-interpreted and vested with a new meaning. Here, it should be borne in mind the idea is manipulated by both sides to serve a double-edged purpose: on the one hand, the foreign elements who had suffered during the *Mau Mau* freedom struggle, hope to be integrated into the Meru society and obliterate their external non-Meru links for which they had been threatened with removal from the area between 1957 and 1962; and on the other, the *mahaji*

descendants are uplifted. Since they were born into the faith, unlike their fathers who had been converted, and they are considered to be equal to their cousins (the Swahili men married local women - see the case of the two sisters discussed in the previous chapter) the descendants of the Swahili Muslim pioneers.

Here, the concept of birth in the faith becomes charged with new significance, as Turner would have it.⁵³ Previously, it divided the Muslims, now it unites them. The social boundaries and group distinctiveness have gradually been dissipated. The concept of birth as it was applied in Meru, can be understood to connote not only a new beginning but also continuity stretching into the future. In an insecure transitional period, it becomes necessary to attach the values of religious purity to descent from the *mahaji* which is associated with occupancy of higher religious status and confers respect upon the occupants. Thus the construction of a new religious community identity in Meru can be understood in terms of Abner Cohen's "structural" or "historical" change, rather than his "cyclical" change.⁵⁴

The available data on the Meru Mjini and Majengo Muslims does not indicate a cyclical change as the pioneers began to give way to the second generation of Muslims. Well defined and graded roles and a series of clear-cut stages through which an individual must go in order to move from one status to another in the Sabo society are evidently absent in this case. The second generation Muslims could not be said to step into the shoes of their fathers in a cyclical sense - times have changed. For instance, the military (in which most of the pioneers worked) and the civil administration are no longer linked, as was the case during the early days of the British rule.⁵⁵ Hence the most important distinction between the Sabo and the Majengo

⁵³ V. Turner, 1967:28.

⁵⁴ Abner Cohen, 1969:25.

⁵⁵ See the discussion on the role of the K.A.R. in chapter 1, p. 46.

is that in the former "men became more settled not as a result of a slow process of 'acculturation' or 'socialization' but of a dramatic movement from one role to another..."⁵⁶ While the reverse is true in the latter case, with acculturation and socialization being the cardinal parts of the whole process.

At one level of abstraction, the cohesion of the community is ensured; at another, the community insulates itself from the outsiders. Previously, the struggle was between the self-styled standard-bearers of faith (the Swahili) and the *mahaji*, on the one hand, and between the Muslims as a whole and the overwhelming non-Muslim majority of Meru people on the other, whom they (Muslims) saw as *washenzi wasio na dini*, 'uncivilized people without religion'. With the elimination of the first level, that is the *mahaji* level, only one level is now left, that is the struggle to resist the mounting pressure from the overwhelming non-Muslim majority of the people moving into the enlarged town, in order to construct a common religious community identity.

Towards Unity

What is the real test of whether there is an emerging urban community Muslim identity among the Muslim groups in Meru town? The real test is for us to identify the changes that are taking place and show in what direction they are moving - whether they point to an evolving community identity or not. The first of these is a changing attitude, evident in the recognition by all the sections of the Muslims, of the need to create a sense of unity among members. As has just been said above, the events leading to the attainment of independence in 1963 and the attendant social-economic changes, undermined the foundations of the Muslim presence in Meru, forcing the Muslims to search for unity in order to affirm their

⁵⁶ Abner Cohen, 1969:32.

identity and their virtues over against those of other groups in the enlarged town. The idea of unity was popularized in the informal gatherings (*baraza*), where men sat during their spare time and discussed religious questions, current affairs or any topical issues affecting the community. Muslims were beginning to realize that they had a common destiny in their struggle against *ushenzi*, which was seen as becoming increasingly threatening. This unity came to be embodied in the person of the well respected Sheikh Said.

Sheikh Said commanded great respect and wielded immense authority, owing to his coastal lineage and his Muslim learning. It was felt by many people that he was beyond the local squabbles, and true to this, his charismatic leadership played an important role in uniting and consolidating the Muslim community in the town. He became the 'big Sheikh' with wide ranging duties: he acted as the Qadhi, the indisputable arbitrator whenever personal, individual or community disputes arose, and headed the various deputations to the local and other government agents, in which he was the recognized spokesman for and leader of the Muslim community. His authority which transcended the group boundaries, was legitimated by his relatively high religious learning - he was regarded as the most learned Sheikh in Meru at that time.⁵⁷

Under his leadership the Muslims began to see themselves as a single entity as opposed to the forces of *ushenzi*. As a community apart, they could clearly identify the religious beliefs and practices which engendered this 'apartness'. Pouwels points out

people's self-consciousness, their awareness of themselves as a distinctive cultural group is profoundly affected by their collective

⁵⁷ Sheikh Said was said to be of Comoro origin. He was well respected and my informants spoke very well of him.

experiences of the world in which they live both in time and space...⁵⁸

In view of the changes taking place in Meru at that time, the Muslims brought their experiences to bear upon their relationship with the rest of the town residents. Their awareness of themselves as a separate group proved advantageous to Islam in so far as it strengthened the devotion to the Muslim community on the one hand; and on the other, it became a liability in so far as it deliberately curtailed the relations with those who were considered to be outsiders. The result was the stagnation of the spread of the faith for about two decades, that is from the late 1950s to the mid-seventies when a current of Middle Eastern and Pakistani influence swept through the region.⁵⁹

'Learn and Proclaim Your Faith'

In these changing circumstances affecting Meru Muslims, a new relationship between the standard bearers of the faith and the converts is defined, expressed and legitimated within the provisions of Islam. Accordingly, attention is redirected towards the importance of learning and living one's religion in accordance with the scriptures and the fulfillment of the obligatory prescriptions. This point is articulated in one of Sheikh Said's Friday sermons. He warned that

⁵⁸ R. L. Pouwels, 1987:23.

⁵⁹ The role of *Tabligh* in the recent spread of Islam in Meru is analyzed in chapter 6, pp. 246-251.

Days are gone when we used to distinguish between Swahili and Nubians, between Swahili and *mahaji*. Those were days of ignorance, when many people did not understand the fundamental teachings of Islam. Now we have some individuals, among them our own sons, who can read the Book for themselves and to others. This is a big step forward, of which we must take advantage to strengthen our faith. Our fathers have now retired in old age and it is upon the young men to keep the light of Islam burning in this region. You must proclaim your faith to the rest of the people - remember that the *Kalimah*, (the confession of faith) is the first pillar of faith. This underscores the importance of the proclamation of faith by a Muslim. Of course this is not to override the other pillars, especially prayer. You must proclaim your faith, or else how will other people know what you believe? On the other hand proclamation alone is not enough, one must live according to the teachings of Islam, which are spelt out clearly in the Holy Quran and the Sunnah of the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him).

In the early days our neighbours on both the right and the left hand-sides were fellow Muslims and they watched over each other. It is not the same any longer. Your next-door neighbour is not necessarily bound by the same religious canon as you, therefore, your actions must demonstrate that you are a Muslim. Your observance of the religious obligations will show that you are different from the other person who is not bound by these obligations.⁶⁰

Sheikh Said's statement was an acknowledgement of the process of change that has been taking place in the area over the years. The faithful had to adjust accordingly, but then what should they do? Learning and living one's faith is the answer. Previously, acculturation of the converts had been emphasized to the detriment of religious instruction,⁶¹ but now

⁶⁰ It is said that Sheikh Said used the Friday sermons to communicate to the Muslims the need for unity and awareness of their Muslim identity. He laid emphasis on the significance of living according to the teaching of Islam especially at that time when Muslims were becoming outnumbered in the town. His sermons were effective in rallying together the Muslims in the town and they are still remembered by many individuals who heard them. There were several versions of the above extract, but the theme that runs through is his call for unity of all Muslims in Meru. Perhaps this is a testimony that the community was deeply divided.

⁶¹ See chapter 2 (pp.94-95) for further information on the process of acculturation of the local women who married the Swahili Muslims.

the emphasis was shifting towards the importance of learning more about the faith than just the distinction between *halal* and *haram*. In the early period to which the Sheikh refers as the days of ignorance, a phrase normally used to refer to the pre-Islamic times, the Quran was taught without translation and very few people, if any grasped the meaning of what was taught. But now, there was a small number of young Muslims who, having been born and raised in the town with the facility of three mosques - one for each group - and several teachers offering religious instruction in their own houses, Muslims had acquired a limited measure of literacy in Arabic and religious education.

In addition to these, some young men had just returned from their studies under some of the renowned religious scholars on the East African coast.⁶² Thus some were able to read the Quran. This accessibility to the Quran, albeit limited in scope, had an effect upon the Muslim community. Indicative of its impact were the reading sessions which became an increasingly important activity during the *baraza*, meetings or gatherings in which men sit to sip coffee and discuss the current affairs. These *baraza* are a common Swahili practice though they may, and sometimes do have different functions in different places. In this case, these *baraza*, held several times a week, provided opportune time for religious discussions based on the Quranic readings as well as other general issues concerning Muslims.

⁶² At this time some of the young men who had been sent to the coast to study the Quran were returning home. One of them had been sponsored by the Jumuiia-Tul-Baladia to study in Zanzibar, though he returned after one year due to some difficulties there. It is interesting to note that the Muslims in Meru are experiencing a revolutionizing effect of coast-trained teachers in the mid 1960s, while the effect of Ali bin Khalid, among others, was being felt by the end of the first World War in the old Pangani in Nairobi. It is evident that in Meru the 'standard bearers' of *dini* held sway over the others until the *Mau Mau* nationalists shook them out of their complacency in 1952.

It follows then that, not only is the claim to Islam necessary, but also the ostentation of such a claim in shaping the urban Muslim community identity, both to themselves and outsiders - they must be seen to be different. This state of affairs resulted from the social context, that of a minority status, within which the Muslims had to define themselves in opposition and relation to the wider non-Muslim majority. In the absence of much else in the form of political and economic achievements, or existence of other forms of social identity and distinctions to mark them off, the Muslims turn inward and employ the use of "religious names", "religious language", (Kiswahili), "religious" mode of dress and mosque attendance. We shall examine the use of each these external "religious" symbols.

Mosque Attendance

The first of these external symbols is attendance at the mosque. Up till now, each group used its own mosque and there was no concept of the Friday mosque. But when Sheikh Said began to cultivate a sense of unity, the idea of Friday Mosque came up and he became its Imam, rallying the people around it. He came to be recognized as 'the big sheik'. Incidentally, at that time, the district administration proposed to transfer the old Swahili mosque from the present site of the Jamia mosque to the site where the Meru Muslim Primary School stands today. This proposal provoked much antagonism and the centrality of the mosque henceforth became a thorny issue. The Muslims objected to the proposed transfer, asserting that the mosque was centrally located for all the sections of the community and therefore, its removal would jeopardize its neutrality, and adversely affect its role as the Friday mosque.⁶³

⁶³ In the absence of any records or even a plaque in the mosque, it was not possible to fix the precise date when the present Jamia Mosque was built. However my informants said that it was built in the 1960s, in what was then the New Township site after the implementation of the town plan in 1954/55. There was a difference of opinion with regard to whether the Asian Muslims or the

From then on a great deal of emphasis was laid on Friday attendance at the mosque. Women were encouraged to attend the Friday prayers regularly. During the *baraza*, men who failed to attend regularly were admonished by the sheikh, showing devotion and piety were gauged by regular attendance and performance of communal prayers. Illustrative of this was the significance attached to the facial mark, *sijda*, caused by prostration during prayer. This mark is valued as a sign of piety, it is seen as a mark of *swalihina*, those who pray regularly. According to Sheikh Mwinyi some people even rub their faces hard on the mat during prayer in order to get the mark of *swalihina*.⁶⁴ It is not for us to judge the truth of this claim, but as my informant said, it is believed that the facial mark will serve as a torch for the believer when his body is put in the grave. However, the point being made here is that external display of piety, external religious symbols acquire a prominence hitherto unknown.

During the Friday sermon, the Imam urged the Muslims to observe the religious obligations, and during the *baraza*, the sermons would be explicated within the local religious and social context. The extent to which these discourses impacted upon the people is difficult to assess, but they seem to have exerted great influence. In the words of my informant, Sheikh Ali who not only participated but also played a leading role in these discourses:

these discourses were useful in clarifying many issues relating to Muslim etiquette and thus helped to strengthen the Muslims at this difficult time. Regular attendance at the mosque was important first for the individual believer, and second for the community - congregational prayers cut across group boundaries and unite the

African Muslims or both contributed to the construction of Jamia mosque. The controversy over the control of this mosque is dealt with in chapter 5, pp. 214-217.

⁶⁴ The significance of the facial mark caused by rubbing the face on the prayer mat regularly is elucidated in chapter 6, pp. 295-296.

people as they pray together shoulder-to-shoulder friend and foe, poor and rich, young and old.⁶⁵

There is evidence to suggest that these activities were bolstered by the appearance of Sheikh Abdullah Saleh Farsy's Swahili translation of the Quran in 1969.⁶⁶ A number of individuals were able to obtain copies of the Swahili translation, making Quranic reading, which had been a prerogative of a few privileged individuals, accessible even to those who were not literate in Arabic. The result, as we shall see below, was an increased religious knowledge for many more people; and an increased use of Arabised Kiswahili as more people began to make references to the Quran in the day-to-day conversation.

Contending 'With the Language of Washenzi'

As has just been said above, the use of 'religious language' became an external symbol, a mark of distinction between Muslims and others.⁶⁷ What one sees at this time is a changing pattern of language use in Meru. Throughout the early period - 1908 to the late 1950s - the Nubians kept strictly to their language, Kinubi, among themselves. At the same time, the use of Kiswahili was inevitable, first as a means of communication within the wider heterogenous population and second between the spouses, as most of the foreigners obtained local wives.

⁶⁵ Interview with Sheikh Ali, Meru town, 16th November 1991.

⁶⁶ Sheikh Swaleh Farsy was the Chief Qadhi of Kenya for many years. He studied under some of the most famous East African *Ulama* and worked on the translation of the Qur'an for many year, not only to produce a masterpiece but also the first Swahili translation of the Holy Quran: *Quran Takatifu*, Nairobi, the Islamic Foundation, 1969.

⁶⁷ The symbolic value of Kiswahili has always been important in different places, see J. L. Balda, 1991:8-10.

For our purpose, it is important to note the Nubian insistence on the use of their language by all the residents of their village.⁶⁸ One sheikh, a Nubi descendant, says that as a child, he was not allowed by his parents to learn Kimeru, *Luga ya washenzi*, the language of the uncivilized. His father was keen to impart Kinubi to his children; and to ensure that the children did not learn *luga ya washenzi*, all the children in the neighbourhood were required by their fathers to learn and speak Kinubi. It was felt that the children were prone to the 'danger' of picking up their mothers' language, therefore, all the local women married to Nubians had to learn Kinubi and always speak it.⁶⁹ There are two explanations for state of affairs: first the Meru women married to the Nubian men had to learn the language as a means of fully integrating them, and second, the children were required to identify with their fathers and not their mothers. But then this was couched in religious terms.

In her study of the usage of language in a multi-ethnic setting in Pumwani, Nairobi, Bujra observes that the use of different languages serves two purposes: it facilitates intimate communication⁷⁰ amongst members of each group and at the same time, marks them off from others. In Meru, the use of Kinubi by the Nubians added another dimension to these two: it underscored the alleged superiority of Nubians over other residents of the township. It was to its speakers a superior language for, after all, it had

⁶⁸ There were 8 Wanyamwezi ex-Askari house owners living with their families in the Nubian village. There were also a number of Manyema and others collectively referred to as Nyasaland ex-Askari, probably from Malawi and other place in Central Africa - see the formation of King's African Rifles in 1902 entailed a merger of the Central African Rifles (1&2); East African Rifles; and Uganda Rifles, H. C. Moyse-Bartlet (1956:111) Also see (C. Hobley 1928:187) for the role of the Wanyamwezi, "Manyema from west of Lake Tanganyika" in the Zanzibari caravans.

⁶⁹ Karamburi, married to a Nubi sergeant, told me that she had to learn Kinubi so that her children would not pick up Kimeru from her. Interview, Mjini, 27th October, 1991.

⁷⁰ J. Bujra, 1974:218.

borrowed some words from Arabic and by analogy, it was closer to Arabic and hence closer to Islam than Kimeru. Also their insistence on its use points to a collective manipulation of a fundamental cultural element by a group, in order to actually keep itself closed to those seen as outsiders. This manipulation is manifest in the restriction (just described above) placed by the Nubi men on their wives' use of Kimeru. This way the Nubian community identity would be sustained in spite of its shrinking size. Thus the use of Kinubi in Meru may be appropriately placed in a different and evidently higher category than Bujra's "vernaculars", used in the multi-ethnic Pumwani Muslim community; it had a deeper meaning for its speakers, it was a status symbol for them. Islam was conveniently dragged in, in an attempt to legitimate this manipulation by making reference to the all pervading concept of *ushenzi* with all its negative connotations which we have discussed above.

After 1963, the Muslims began to define themselves as a religious community as opposed to the enveloping majority of non-believers. The focus of the emphasis shifted from the distinct elements of the various groups towards a common Muslim identity. During the period between 1910 and 1955, the different groups maintained their social and religious cleavages: the Nubians projected themselves as second only to Europeans, an attitude reinforced by the preferential treatment accorded them, best illustrated by their exemption from carrying passes on their persons as was required of all natives. The *mahaji* in Majengo, on the other hand, had constituted a community of converted people, whose internal solidarity was crucial in the face of hostility and pressure exerted from various quarters: the Swahili, the Nubians and more significantly, from their non-Muslim relatives and the Meru society in general. Sheikh Mwinyi lamented "that at this time such petty issues divided the Muslims in Meru".⁷¹ For our purpose, these attitudes cannot be regarded as petty because they were

⁷¹ Interview with Sheikh Mwinyi, 16th November 1991.

crucial to those who held them and indeed, it is to such attitudes that the existing cleavages can be attributed.

At this point (the late 1960s) there was a conscious effort to obliterate these cleavages, there was a discernible change in a particular direction: a culturally constructed Muslim identity is evolving in the town. It should also be remembered that the residents of the old Swahili village have been transferred to the ridge in 1954/55, making the settlement no longer a domain of the Nubians. As I have mentioned above, the decline of Nubi influence at this time could also be attributed to the migration of a number of families to Kibera in Nairobi, which is the largest Nubi enclave in Kenya. These factors may explain the diminishing use of Kinubi in Meru, which is now used only in the family circles,⁷² but they may not explain the failure to replace it with Kimeru or the all out effort to popularize the use of Kiswahili by all the Muslims, that was prevalent at this time.

Soon Kiswahili emerged as the everyday language within the group, and the unwritten rule that one should use Kiswahili when talking to fellow Muslims, came into operation. The tendency was for Muslims to speak Kimeru to non-Muslims and use Kiswahili amongst themselves. If two individuals - a Muslim and a non-Muslim - were engaged in a conversation and a second Muslim happened to join them, making the ratio two-to-one, the probability is that s/he would first salute his fellow Muslim in Arabic after which s/he would greet the other person in Kimeru, and most probably the two Muslims would soon enter into a conversation in Kiswahili, interspersed with Arabic phrases. The dialogue might continue for a few minutes, the participation of the other person being contingent upon his or her ability to speak Kiswahili. This behaviour can be explained by the significance attached to the greeting itself, which, as Aguilar also observed

⁷² During the interviews with some of my Nubian informants, they switched from Kiswahili to Kinubi whenever they wanted to exclude me from the conversation.

among the Waso Borana,⁷³ is considered to be religious. The greeting is important in that it helps to keep the flow of blessing. Here it is a form of identity expression for Islam had to be expressed daily and therefore the greeting serves as an expression of a person's 'Muslimness'. Very few people in this area speak Arabic, therefore, an Arabised greeting is an indication of piety. Greetings also provide particularly for the more knowledgeable and pious men, a chance to quote a verse from the Quran. Therefore a believer and a non-believer cannot share the Muslim greeting for it is considered religiously incorrect to do so. When extending greetings to both a Muslim and a non-Muslim, a distinction has to be made between them, hence the separate greetings. It can therefore be said that the Muslims gradually achieved their objective of using Kiswahili to mark themselves off from *washenzi*.⁷⁴

As a result, Kiswahili became the first language for the Muslims in Meru. This is not a peculiar development - Balda has shown that there is "an ever increasing use of the Swahili language as the language of Islam in East Africa"⁷⁵; and that it is becoming the "every day *lingua franca*" for the Muslim refugees from Sudan and Uganda living in North-East Zaire. Again he says that Rwanda, (which in most cases is not considered as part of East Africa where Kiswahili is spoken) is "a country where, in peoples' minds, the Swahili Language is very much linked to Muslim Religion".⁷⁶ Similarly, in Meru it is associated with Islam in the minds of many people, but to the Muslims themselves, it acquires an additional dimension - that of marking them off from the rest of the people. The association of Kiswahili and Islam is further explained by Ali A. Mazrui in his four-stage

⁷³ M. I. Aguilar, 1994:222.

⁷⁴ It has been shown in chapter 2 (pp.93-94) that the notion of *ushenzi* is played up daily, whenever an opportunity presents itself.

⁷⁵ J. L. Balda, 1991:8.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p.24.

development theory of Kiswahili. He points out that it is the native speakers, "the Waswahili proper who are overwhelmingly Muslim",⁷⁷ and that

because Kiswahili developed within an Islamic culture, and borrowed many Arabic words, the language initially carried a considerable Islamic association.⁷⁸

For our purpose here, it is important to point out the disparity in usage of Kiswahili in Kenya and Tanzania, in spite of the fact that it is the national language and the means of communication between members of different ethnic groups in the two countries. Mazrui says that of the total population in Kenya, "only about a quarter a million people speak Kiswahili as a first language".⁷⁹ Though this figure appears too small to be credible, the important point to note is that Kiswahili in the interior of Kenya is still associated with Islam and urban life by many people; while the situation in Tanzania is such that the language

has been promoted for reasons of cultural self-reliance and self-development. One government area after another has been pronounced as an area in which only Kiswahili is to be used.⁸⁰

Thus in Tanzania, the language is not so much associated with Islam in the minds of people generally, as it is in many parts of Kenya. To the Muslims in Meru, the use of Kiswahili was not only considered to be "beneficial", but it also served as a psychological bond, binding together the individual members of the Muslim community. In defence of the use of Kiswahili by people born and raised in the monolingual Meru society, and

⁷⁷ A. A. Mazrui and P. Zirimu, 1990:25.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p.31.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p.40.

⁸⁰ A. A. Mazrui and P. Zirimu, 1990:40.

who are otherwise expected to speak Kimeru as their first language, one of my informants enumerated the benefits of being accustomed to speaking Kiswahili instead of Kimeru:

The benefit of speaking Kiswahili is that one acquires the 'right accent' by constant use of words and phrases, many of which are borrowed from Arabic. Therefore for those who can read the Qur'an, this daily use of Kiswahili is believed to enhance the ability to pronounce the Arabic phrases correctly, to acquire *tamko la Kiarabu*, Arabic accent, which is highly valued. Even the majority who cannot read Arabic, use it in prayers and hence the habitual use of Kiswahili is important to them.⁸¹

In his study of the use of Kiswahili in the rural areas in Kenya, Whiteley analyzed the claimed frequency of the use of Kiswahili in Katheri (rural area) in Meru and concluded that 53% of the total sample claimed competence in Kiswahili at some level; of the "total sample claiming 3/5 frequency, i.e. several times a week or more often" were 27%; and "of total sample claiming 1/2 frequency, i.e. once a week or less" were 26%.⁸² Though things have changed in the last 25 years since Whiteley carried out the study, these figures especially when compared to a few other areas where the study was done at the same time and revealed 100% competence and 88% frequency of 3/5 times a week or more often, show minimal use of Kiswahili in the rural areas in Meru.

It can therefore be said that there exists a direct relationship between usage of Kiswahili and adherence to Islam in an area where the majority of the people are monolingual, and Muslims are conspicuous in their use of Kiswahili.⁸³ To them, it is indisputably second in rank to

⁸¹ Interview with Basil, Amaku, 13th October 1991.

⁸² W. H. Whiteley, 1974:321.

⁸³ For further discussion on the use of Kiswahili as a religious language, see chapter 6, pp.256-260.

Arabic, which is revered as the language of communication with God. The religious aura of Arabic is extended to Kiswahili, since every member is expected to have a reasonable command of the language.⁸⁴

Language is an indisputable element of identity as it is linked to the idea of a group sharing common cultural values. For the Muslims in Meru, a deep knowledge of the language, ability to use its idioms and metaphor, and naturalness in speaking Kiswahili, which the Amir equates to *tamko la Kiarabu*, reflects Islamic religious and cultural appropriateness which the Muslims seek to achieve as a mark of identity.

Conclusion

Some of the points that I have made above need further explanation, and Ali Mazrui's statement that those for whom Kiswahili is the mother tongue have been overwhelmingly Muslim seems to be an appropriate starting point. A number of interpretations may be made about this: first, the Swahili in Meru town served as the standard bearers of the faith to the *mahaji*. What was happening was that the traditional cleavages, expressed in the rival dances described in chapter 2, were being bridged and the previous social boundaries among the Muslims themselves were weakening. During the early period, Islam was used to define and sustain these boundaries, now the reverse was happening - it was being used to efface them and create unity among the believers. The *mahaji* were replaced by second generation Muslims and the Nubians were gradually being subsumed into the Meru society under the umbrella of the Swahili-Islamic culture. It should not seem as if the Nubi elements claimed to be Swahilized

⁸⁴ I was amazed one day, when one of my informants used an idiom which I did not quite understand and when I asked her to explain, she was appalled at what she considered as grave language incompetence on my part. She asked "*kwani wewe watoka wapi, hata lugha hufahamu!*" where do you come from, that you don't even understand the language!

-rather they ceased to emphasize their separate identity from the other Muslims in the town. In other words, all the Muslims in the town came to be seen as one and equal. The fact of being Muslim by birth no longer distinguished one Muslim from another. Thus occurred a social transformation of Islam.

The development of Islamic community identity can also be seen in the emphasis laid on communal prayers and mosque attendance. Though it was important for one to be seen in attendance, it also underscores the importance attached to prayer, which is one of the fundamental pillars of faith. There was also a greater emphasis on the Quran and Sunnah. Previously, when all the residents of the *mji* were Muslims and, to use the words of Sheikh Said, "watched over one another", propriety of behaviour was especially important because one had to be seen by others, neighbours and friends, to uphold and fulfil the social and moral obligations of a Muslim society. As has been shown, acculturation up to this time had been emphasized to the detriment of religious instruction. Wearing "religious" clothes, cooking certain kinds of foods and speaking a different language were considered enough to mark off the Muslims from *washenzi*.

It seems that the tenacity with which the Muslims clung to the cultural dimension during the early period, superseded the attention accorded to the scriptural and doctrinal dimension of Islam. Now the influx of different people into the town, some of whom had western education with its attendant prestige and social status, which the Muslims did not have, called for a more sophisticated approach by the latter. This became all the more necessary because some of the cultural elements undoubtedly lost their Muslim exclusiveness when they were acquired by the so-called "enlightened" non-Muslims. What was happening now was that an elite had emerged and was posing a serious threat to the Muslim community. It seemed that the tables had been turned - the *washenzi* who were considered

to be backward, had now become "enlightened", if anything they had achieved a much higher standard of living than the Muslims. I suggest therefore, that by urging the Muslims to live according to the teachings spelt out in the Quran and Sunnah, Sheikh Said was voicing the need for them to adopt a scriptural approach to the changing social circumstances, since that was the one which seemed to provide a more solid foundation for distinctiveness. This can also be seen as an identity with the Muslim ummah which, as Launay observes, transcends the local distinctions.⁸⁵

Can we, then, regard the increasing emphasis on the Quran as an expression of the Muslims' desire to express their religious community identity within Islam and therefore insulate themselves against the non-Muslim majority in the town? The answer is in the affirmative, but the situation was much more complex than this, for the underlying struggle between *dini* and *ushenzi* continued. Paradoxically, the emerging elite was, in the eyes of the Muslims, still in the condition of *ushenzi*. This takes us back to the meaning of *ushenzi* for the Muslims in Meru - it was not merely the opposite of civilization, and could not be eradicated solely by the acquisition of western education and modernity. In other words, it is all that which Islam is not. As a result, the Muslims seemed to be implying that the struggle between *dini* and *ushenzi* has not ended.

⁸⁵ R. Launay, 1992:108.

CHAPTER FOUR

BORANA MUSLIMS AND THE 'SHEIKH' CULT IN MERU

Introduction

In this chapter, I shall examine the attempts to propagate a form of sheikh cult by the Borana¹ Muslims, who entered Meru from the neighbouring Isiolo district and the North-eastern Province. Islam is the main religion in Isiolo. Adherence to religious orders, particularly those of Qadiriyya² and Salihyya,³ is an important aspect of Somali Islam. The

¹ The former N.F.D. (now Norther-Eastern Province and parts of Eastern Province) is occupied by the Somali, Borana and other related nomadic peoples. As will be seen below, Isiolo still maintains close social and economic ties with Meru.

² Qadiriyya order is named after its founder, Abdul Qadir Jailan, born in 470 AH/ca.1077 in Jailan, south of the Caspian Sea. The general theme of his doctrine was the necessity of a period of asceticism, during which persons should remove themselves from the world while in communion with the deity. After this period a person may return and enjoy the remaining part of his life converting others. His followers attributed to him the ability to perform miracles. He was a renowned jurist and the body of doctrines with his authority was sufficient to constitute a system. Though his order reached Somalia in the early period, it was Sheikh Uways bin Mohammed al Barawi who revived it in the 19th century. Sheikh Uways went to Bagdad for further instruction in 1870. Eventually, he became a fully-fledged sufi and he is said to have received the body of secret spiritual knowledge, believed to be transmitted from the founder. He returned to Somalia in 1880 and became the undisputed leader of the local adherents of the order. It is difficult to fix a precise date when the order reached Northern Kenya because for many years - before the present boundaries were drawn to divide the Somali country among the states of Kenya, Ethiopia and Somalia, the Somali people roamed the whole region. For information on the origins of the new Qadiriyya order in East Africa, see B.G. Martin (1976:160-165).

³ Salihyya order took its name after a Sudanese Mohammed Ibn Salih Al-Rashid (1854-1917) who lived in Mecca. The order spread from Western Arabia across the red Sea into the Somali country where it gained many adherents. Doctrinally, Salihyya descended from Ahmadiyya order, founded by Ibn Al-Fari (1758-1837), a reformer of Mecca.

Horn of Africa, to which Somali Islam belongs, "shares with the Sudan that marked emphasis on the cult of saints and Sufi Orders".⁴ The traditionally Muslim Somalis are credited with the Islamization of the Borana, a process which "meant piece-meal Somalization",⁵ particularly of the Borana living in and around Isiolo.

A significant proportion of Borana Muslims owe allegiance to Husseiniyya, the order attributed to Sheikh Hussein of Bale, Somalia, through the *ayaana* rituals. Sheikh Hussein is revered by many Borana Muslims and shrines dedicated to him attract many pilgrims annually. The main figure of the cult is Sheikh Hussein, who is believed to have worked miracles for the poor and brought back to life dead stock. The term *ayaana* is given a variety of meanings, including a cult of the same name. In everyday language the term *ayaana* was used in relation to the traditional lunar calendar which has 27 days. The days are invested with both positive and negative forces influencing the society in various ways and hence the calendar serves as a basis for spiritual activities. Its use as a spiritual concept is more common among the agricultural Oromo across the border in Ethiopia.⁶

Ayaana cult draws from both the Borana traditional religious sources and Islam,⁷ blending the elements from these two sources into a cult analogous to the better known *sar* cult among the Somali.⁸ To its practitioners, *ayaana* is associated with a particular body of spirits which,

⁴ I. M. Lewis, 1966:9.

⁵ P. T. W. Baxter, 1966:249.

⁶ G. Dahl, 1989:153.

⁷ I. M. Lewis, 1983:68.

⁸ For information on *sar* possession cult among the Somali, see I. M. Lewis, 1971:75-80.

unlike the humans who were made of mud on the same day, were made of smoke. The spirits were given to the Prophet and later assigned to Sheikh Hussein.⁹

Hjort makes a brief presentation of the connection between *ayaana* and Husseiniiyya, which he sees as "purely local".¹⁰ *Ayaana* and Husseiniiyya are inextricably linked- *ayaana* focuses on the person of Sheikh Hussein and pilgrimages are made to the Sheikh's shrine rather than to Mecca. Initiation into Husseiniiyya equips the members with the ability to communicate with *ayaana* spirits. Possession by these spirits, as Aguilar further notes, is explained in terms of their wish for a gift - they have power to make their wishes known, so they take possession of an individual in order to explicitly and actively communicate their wishes. Diagnostic sessions are held for the adept to identify the particular spirit that is active at a given time. The sessions in which other members of the cult are in attendance, provide support for the afflicted person. When the active spirit has been identified by the adept, it is placated with gifts and an animal is sacrificed.¹¹

What the sheikhs were trying to cultivate in Meru was the cult of Sheikh Hussein, but as has been shown, it is intimately linked with the *ayaana* rituals in Borana culture. The connection between *ayaana* and Husseiniiyya is clearly brought out by Aguilar in his analysis of the various meanings and dimensions of the concept of *ayaana* among the Borana - *ayaana* provides the means for the expression of the Husseiniiyya sufi cult within the Borana cultural milieu. An *ayaana* ritual "has many connotations and certainly hymns related to the cult of Sheikh Nur Hussein of Bale are very prominent during the sessions" and even then "only part

⁹ M.I. Aguilar, 1991:34.

¹⁰ A.Hjort, 1979:44-45.

¹¹ See M.I. Aguilar, 1991:34.

of the session is related to the actual solving of sickness... most of the session is spent on singing and praising Sheikh Hussein".¹²

Opposition to *Ayaana* Rituals in Meru Town

Information on the practice of *ayaana* cult in Isiolo is rather scarce. According to Dahl, *ayaana* was unknown in Isiolo until 1952 when the first case of possession was reported among the Borana coming from the north in Marsabit and Moyale.¹³ Baxter too, points out it was in the early 1950s that a few Borana elders were endeavoring to maintain religious customs and adopt cultural traits associated with Islam by the Borana.¹⁴ It is possible therefore, to link the prevalence of the *ayaana* cult at that particular time with an increase in Islamic influence in the form of Husseiniiyya. Hjort observes that in Isiolo,

Through the *ayaana* cult, which is associated with this tariqa (Husseiniiyya) and which is condemned at the mosque, one establishes and formalizes a communion with other poor or oppressed Muslims. An interesting aspect of this cult is that the solidarity is restricted to Muslims and becomes horizontal. Thus membership implies a certain degree of opposition to the Muslim affluent social class.¹⁵

Livestock is the life-line of the Borana, Somali and other pastoralist peoples living in Isiolo and the entire north-eastern region of Kenya. Due to the arid climate in the region, drought is a constant threat to livestock and hence to large pastoralist populations who depend on it. This constant threat to livestock which is the mainstay of the Borana pastoralists, perhaps explains the belief that sheikh Hussein performed miracles for the

¹² Aguilar, 1994:277-278.

¹³ G. Dahl, 1989:154.

¹⁴ P. T. W. Baxter, 1966:235.

¹⁵ A. Hjort, 1979:42.

poor and brought back to life dead stock. Usually when famine strikes many people are left destitute and the only alternative open to them is to move to urban centres in hope of finding a substitute means of survival. Many of these victims of natural calamities (which are not infrequent) find solace in joining the Husseiniyya order and through the *ayaana* ceremonies and rituals, they establish solidarity of members. Also frustrated married Somali women, sometimes wives of prominent men, join the order which provides for them a means of challenging the male dominated world of the pastoralist. Hjort ^{sees} *ayaana* activities in Isiolo as attempts "to express and counter in a ritualistic manner an oppressing and frustrating situation for impoverished Muslims".¹⁶

The Husseiniyya cult is seen by the Muslim establishment as an unislamic practice picked from the bush, with the result that it is condemned at the mosque as *shirk*, associating God with other beings, and outlawed by the prominent religious leaders in Isiolo. The displacement of many Borana and Somali from their homes in Isiolo and surrounding areas after the '*shifta*'¹⁷ disturbances in the late 1960s, is largely responsible for what Hjort sees as a rapid spread of Husseiniyya and its attendant *ayaana*

¹⁶ A. Hjort, 1979:44.

¹⁷ The international boundaries between Ethiopia, Somalia and Kenya were drawn by the colonial administrators to suit their own interests, without due regard to the ethnic boundaries and interests of the inhabitants of the area in question. It was not long before the resultant problems became apparent. Therefore, shortly prior to independence in 1963, a commission was set up to investigate the opinion of the peoples living in the then N.F.D. and determine what their preference was - whether to become part of Kenya or Somalia (See the "Report of the Regional Boundaries Commission", 1962). But the peoples in question showed the least degree of consensus: the non-Muslim groups preferred to remain in Kenya; while the Muslims opted to join Somalia (Baxter 1966:234). However, the colonial government arbitrarily decided that the N.F.D. should remain part of Kenya (Hjort 1979:34). Consequent upon this decision, the groups which had wanted to join Somalia carried out a ceaseless secessionist campaign, which culminated in a sort of guerilla warfare in the late 1960s. To them the term '*shifta*' which in Amharic means 'bandits' was attached, (M.I. Aguilar:1994:23). Even today, the '*shifta*' pose a serious problem for the northern-most part of Meru.

cult.¹⁸ During the '*Shifita*' war, a number of the displaced Borana families and individuals, sought refuge in Meru town. They became tenants among the Muslims in the Nubian village. These 'new comers' brought with them their customary practice of *ayaana* cult. Muslim leaders here, too, branded them unislamic and banned the Borana from the mosque. The Borana tenants were threatened with expulsion by their Muslim Nubi or Swahili landlords if they continued to perform *ayaana* rituals in the houses in which the other (Swahili) Muslims also lived. One of the sheikhs who strongly opposed the observance of *ayaana* rituals in the settlement, attributed his own antagonism to what he described as:

a threat to the Meru Muslim community. The leaders who out-lawed the *ayaana* practices within the town, constituted the over all authority on the religious affairs of all the Muslims in the town. These Borana were few, but they were now living among us, in our houses. If we did not object to their performance of these unislamic rituals in our houses, inaction or silence on our part would not only imply our approval of these rituals, but it would also encourage them to spread these ideas to the rest of the people in the settlement. In view of the physical and social set-up, it would be practically impossible for the Borana to keep their practice to themselves, if they persisted in their performance of *ayana* rituals while living in our midst.¹⁹

Concern about syncretism alone cannot be taken as the real reason behind the condemnation of *ayaana* rituals by the Muslim leaders in Meru Town. There is no *a priori* reason why a local 'Swahili' practice which is perhaps no less syncretic than *ayaana*, is necessarily more Islamic, or religiously appropriate than the Borana adherence to Husseiniyya through traditional *ayaana* rituals. There are three plausible explanations for the resolute opposition to *ayaana* rituals in Meru Town: first, in Isiolo, adherence to Husseiniyya through the *ayana* cult served as a means of solidarity among the oppressed Muslims, a means of opposition to the well-

¹⁸ A. Hjort, 1979:45.

¹⁹ Interview with Sheikh Mamoun, Meru Town, 26th October, 1991.

to-do; and subsequently became the source of controversy at the mosque which was (and still is) the centre of power.²⁰ Being associated with the lowly members of the society as a means of opposition to others, the cult therefore had little chance of successfully accommodating itself as a different (from the predominantly Swahili cultural milieu) and viable source of religious influence among the Muslims in Meru town.

The Meru Muslim leaders realizing Isiolo's proximity to Meru and the economic and social relationship between the two areas,²¹ both of which could be great assets in the spread of the cult, became anxious to counter the influence of this cult in Meru town. This anxiety is reflected in the Sheikh's statement above, that the cult was viewed as a threat to the existing local religious and social order. The influence of *ayaana* had to be 'nipped in the bud', to borrow the words of my informant.²² Second, the cult was, to a certain extent, associated with the secessionist war in the minds of many people in Meru, and it is highly likely that this association with '*shifta*' contributed significantly to its rejection. The Muslims in Meru were emerging from the backlash of *Mau Mau* nationalism, which had precipitated a re-definition of their identity vis-a-vis the rest of the Meru people.²³ Third, as has been shown in chapter 3, by 1967 when the Borana appeared on the scene, the social boundaries that previously marked off the members of the various Muslim groups from one another, were beginning to dissipate as the Swahili, Nubi and *mahaji* descendants drifted towards

²⁰ A. Hjort 1979:42.

²¹ There is a symbiotic relationship between Meru and Isiolo. For a long time Isiolo has served as an extension of Gakoromone market in Meru town and prostitutes to Isiolo are recruited from the areas around Njaambene hills through Majengo in Meru town (A.Hjort, 1979:116, 159).

²² Interview with Sheikh Mwinyi, Meru, 16th November, 1991.

²³ The process of common Muslim identity construction and the emergent urban Muslim community of those born in the faith is discussed in detail in chapter 3.

a common Muslim community identity within Meru town. They were now concerned by the more immediate and vital issue of fostering Muslim unity and community identity, in the face of the threat posed by the influx of many people into the town after independence.

On the one hand, it is possible to see *ayaana* rituals and Husseiniyya cult as a means of creating and sustaining solidarity of the oppressed,²⁴ on the other, it may be an expression of religious affiliation, an affiliation to Somali-Borana rather than the Swahili brand of Islam. One possible development at that time when the Borana in the Nubian Village were first displaced by the '*shifta*' disturbances and then faced with hostility from their hosts, was an emergence of a community-within-a-community, this is to say that they might have insulated themselves from the rest of the Meru Muslim community, with their separate group identity finding expression in *ayaana* and Husseiniyya rituals. Given a chance in this case, ethnicity, since the Borana, unlike the heterogenous Swahili group, were drawn from a single ethnic category, might have reinforced closed-group formation.²⁵

What I wish to suggest here is that the controversy between the Meru Muslim leaders and the *ayaana* practitioners, was largely an attempt to create an impenetrable barrier against what was seen as a foreign and therefore, unwelcome influence borne by the Borana Muslims. It was a means of opposition to intrusion by another source of Muslim influence into Meru town. In the prevailing circumstances, the prospects of the formation in Meru town of the type of the ritual community that Cohen describes in the Sabon Gari in the Nigerian towns²⁶ were remote. The viability of such a community would necessarily depend on its ability to cut across the

²⁴ See I. M. Lewis, 1985:69 and A. Hjort, 1979:41.

²⁵ The process of retribalization of a group in a minority situation is adequately documented. See for instance A.Cohen, 1969:4-5 and F.W.Lewis, 1978:20.

²⁶ A. Cohen, 1969:204.

existing social boundaries and provide a new focus of religious, and perhaps social-economic interest for the various interest groups. The *ayaana* cult did not cut across the Muslim groups; and therefore it could not provide such a focus in Meru town

The Borana Sheikhs and the Search for Power in Igembe

In his discussion on the East African sheikhs, Constantin notes that:

The seed of charisma is made up not only of factors related to both individual and relational religious qualities, but also... of social factors, which then give the sheikh's word total authority.²⁷

His observation fits neatly with the situation that is found outside the Muslim settlements within the town. While the Muslim leaders in Meru town managed to halt the infiltration of *ayaana* cultic influence, the somewhat isolated Muslim families living in Igembe, about 30 miles away, both geographically and socially excluded from the Muslim nucleus in Meru town, appeared more susceptible to it (cultic influence) through the Borana sheikhs who began to frequent the area in the early 1970s. Their susceptibility which furnished an opportunity for the sheikhs to display their (obviously rare) skills and establish themselves there could be largely attributed to social factors.

What then were these factors? First, living outside the Majengo milieu which usually furnishes a unique and vital social and religious network for individual Muslims in most places in the interior,²⁸ the

²⁷ F. Constantin, 1988:71.

²⁸ See discussion on Majengo social-religious network in chapter 5, 225-229.

individual Muslims scattered in different trade centres in Igembe²⁹ did not have as solid a base for a social-religious network as did their counterparts within the town

Secondly, a significant proportion of local pioneer converts in Igembe in the northern part of the district, came into contact with Islam either as a result of residence in North-Eastern Province, or through some form of contact with Somali or Borana Muslims. In the absence of close ties with the Muslims in Meru town, these families and individuals, came to depend on North-Eastern Province for religious guidance and leadership, with the result that they created and sustained a close relationship with Somali/Borana sheikhs. This alignment is manifest in the reverence and hospitality that the sheikhs enjoyed during their visits and stay at the homes of their hosts and supporters, as will be shown below.

Thirdly, as said earlier on, the pioneer Muslims in the trade centers in Igembe were largely foreigners, as can be seen from the census figures³⁰ for non-natives found in the district at the time of enumeration in 1962. Some of these people, particularly the Borana, Somali and Abashi, provided moral and material support to the visiting sheikhs. A good example is the case of one prominent trader living at Kangeta trade centre, whose home

²⁹ Most of these local Muslim converts, on returning from the various places where they had come into contact with Islam, set up with their families in the trade centres. It was much later when this pattern began to change in the early 1980s as a result of proselytization campaign evident in the construction of a number of new mosques and the establishment of *madrasa* in several places. See chapter 6, pp. 267-270.

³⁰ Census figures obtained from the 1962 census report by the colonial administrators in Kenya to the House of Commons in England, show the total number of non-natives found in the district at the time of census to be 1300, most of them Asian, Somali, Borana and Abashi (Ethiopians). The available evidence shows that these were largely Muslim.

served as a base for the N.F.D. sheikhs and the celebration of *maulid*, sponsored by him, went on for days each year.³¹

Initially, sheikhs from N.F.D. began to visit the area with the purpose of conducting the *maulid*. When asked why the sheikhs were welcome in the area, one of the local Muslim pioneers, almost invariably responded that sheikhs were

invited to read *maulid* on the basis of their Muslim learning. At that time, the Muslims in Igembe did not have their own sheikh. None of our own people was learned enough to preside over the *maulid* celebrations. The Muslims in Igembe looked forward to the celebration of *maulid* read at Lare Mosque. After the big *maulid* at Lare, which served as our centre for a long time, other *maulid* celebrations were held at Kangeta and Azi z home in Maua.³²

This statement may be accepted as an explanation as to why they turned to N.F.D. for support and even more importantly, why the sheikhs managed to get a foothold in this area, albeit for a limited period. However, it should be noted that most of these sheikhs might not be recognized elsewhere as learned. The criteria for being thought learned in Igembe, where the local Muslims were not only few and far between, but also largely uneducated and still mystified by Islam, were different from the criteria in the Muslim settlements within Meru town, where the reading of the Quran was accessible, albeit to a small minority. For instance, it is said that the well respected Sheikh Said traced his roots to Comoro Islands. His Comorian background and his Muslim learning under a famous coastal scholar³³

³¹ Ado, his wife told me that most of the guests invited to these celebrations and the sheikhs who conducted the *maulid*, came from N.F.D.

³² Interview with Mustafa, Kiengu, 12th October 1991.

³³ In Meru and many other places far in the interior of Kenya, the coast is regarded as the abode of Muslim learning. Studying at the coast or going there for 'further religious studies' is quite prestigious for the particular individual and his family. So the fact that Sheikh Said had his religious education at the coast,

were important assets in his leadership of the Muslims in Meru town. The sheikhs in Igembe, though they may not have been considered authoritative elsewhere, nevertheless, knew much more than the local people and thus proved their superiority over them. Their competence was judged by the recovery of lost items that they facilitated; and the effectiveness of their treatment of the sick, while that of Maalim Asuman and Twa in Majengo, for instance, depended largely on the reputation of the teacher under whom they had studied.³⁴

For quite some time, the sheikhs' visits were confined to the trader's home at Kangeta and Lare, where Sheikh Shariff Hussein, attracted by a relatively larger resident Muslim population than any of the other trade centres, established a base. Later on, one prominent cattle and skins and hides trader who converted while living with a Somali family in Isiolo and who was well connected with the N.F.D., set apart a special place for prayers in his homestead, known as *maula*. This *maula* came to serve as the base for sheikhs visiting Kiengu area, for instance Sheikh Shariff Adam who is said to have come to Kiengu in 1974. The significance of this base³⁵ is that it was located in the village outside the trade centres and thus accessible even to those who might secretly want to avail themselves of the

though his teachers were unknown to my informants, was important to the local people - it was supposed that he learned under some of the famous scholars; and whether or not (for it is difficult to ascertain that) he studied under a famous scholar, his association with the coast greatly enhanced his social status, which in turn was an important factor in his leadership of the emerging urban Muslim community in Meru.

³⁴ The two *mahaji* teachers, Asuman and Twa, are said to have been trained in Pangani under the influence of Hajji Khamis, the first Kikuyu Muslim scholar of repute. See chapter 2, p. 87.

³⁵ It is now a public mosque, built of wood and iron in 1979. Abdallah told me that there are about 100 Muslims within the vicinity of this mosque, though only 20-30 people turn up for prayer on Fridays. On the three occasions when I visited the mosque during the afternoon prayer, I found 5-7 people in attendance. My informant attributed the poor attendance to lack of religious knowledge and commitment by the local people.

sheikh's services. Another *maula* was set up at Juma's homestead and now it is a public mosque.³⁶

Let us see what actually happened when the sheikhs began to edge their way in, as they began to oversee the *maulid* celebrations and serve as religious teachers and patrons to the local converts in Igembe. From the accounts of the various informants, it is evident that being able to host the sheikhs and support them for several weeks, was not only a source of prestige, but was also believed to bring good fortune and prosperity (*baraka*) to the host. They came to enjoy a great deal of reverence. Their possession of secret knowledge contributed considerably to the local people's reverence for the sheikhs, which in turn enhanced the latter's prestige. The power of the written word and its impact in Meru have been discussed in chapter 2. Since the majority of the people of Meru were largely uneducated and Arabic was virtually inaccessible, these sheikhs, as Goody observes elsewhere, employed their possession of the written word to maintain a monopoly of the source of their power.³⁷

The importance of the sheikhs' visits is evident in the number of people that went to consult them on such issues as sickness and lost items. Interestingly enough, some of the lost items would be recovered after the consultation.³⁸ The recovery of lost items is not peculiar to this case - use of magic to enhance luck in matters of business and even love, is well

³⁶ For further information on this mosque, see chapter 6, p. 274.

³⁷ J. Goody, 1968:12. This point is raised again in the discussion on the use of picture frames with Arabic Quranic inscriptions in chapter 6 (pp. 285-287) and also in relation to the use of Muslim magic in the widespread practice of seeking the sheikh's 'reading' for various purposes in chapter.

³⁸ Interview with Asuman, (Antubetwe mosque, 16th October 1991) a prominent local Muslim, one of the two whose *maula* were important bases for the visiting sheikhs.

documented aspect of East African Islam.³⁹ The important point for us to note is that the *maula* in Asuman's home served as base for the sheikhs to render these services and in addition, launch Husseiniyya cult.

It was not long before a limited number of individuals at Kiengu, Lare and Kangeta (see map) were initiated into the cult. These individuals⁴⁰ were labeled *watu wa murid*, meaning adherents of *murid*. My attempts to get the details of the initiation rituals from two of my initiated informants (one of them now turned reformer due to *Tabligh* influence) were met with a blunt refusal. Nevertheless, they were agreed that membership to the order entailed admittance into an inner circle, a clique which saw itself as the epitome of faith. They were seen as possessors of *baraka* and this claim to possession of *baraka* legitimated their influence over the local Muslims. A manifestly strong commitment was demanded of all the members and laxity could engender calamity on an individual member.⁴¹

In his study on healing in black Africa, Fisher, though he links healing with the second of his three-stage theory of conversion, makes a relevant point which neatly fits the situation of Husseiniyya cult as

³⁹ See Beckerleg, 1990. This is also comparable to the case of the stolen mosque equipment cited in chapter 2 (pp. 100-102). It was said that the sheikh's prayers were answered when a suspect in the village fell ill and died.

⁴⁰ I was able to trace only 7 local people who claimed to have been initiated into the cult. One of them is married to a Borana woman and speaks the Borana language fluently.

⁴¹ Sheikh Hussam cited an example of one of the pioneer members of the *murid* in the area, whose family are now said to be suffering due to their negligence of the order. Two of his daughters died of illness but according to Sheikh Hussam, their failure to adhere to the order and therefore fulfil the wishes of their departed father, was the cause of these misfortunes. Hussam fears that the whole family might be wiped out if they continue in their laxity.

reflected in the role of the sheikhs in Igembe and the generally nascent stage of Islam in this part of Meru:

it is clear that those characteristics of the healer... his status as a welcome immigrant, the fear which he inspired, and his ability to earn his living - greatly strengthen him as a pioneer representative of Islam whilst that religion is still, in the particular village or chieftaincy concerned, in the quarantine stage.⁴²

It must be emphasized here that the sheikhs were not keen on either proselytizing among the local people, or on revolutionizing Islam in the area. The fear that they instilled in potential converts and the secrecy that they cultivated around the cult shows that they were mainly interested in creating and maintaining their own power over the local people. For instance Shariff who came to Kiengu in 1974 is said to have used magic to convince people of the power of Islam.⁴³

It must, nevertheless be stated here that, the accounts of this cult as given by the various informants are slightly jumbled - during the interviews, three of them claimed to have been initiated into Qadiriyya, and four others into Husseiniyya. Yet they all claimed that they were members of *murid*. This imprecision in stating the identity of the order could be attributed to the secrecy surrounding the cult - only a few individuals were initiated into it and little information was available outside the small circle of members.

While ordinary members of the cult were believed to be ritually protected, the sheikhs themselves were believed to be invested with magical powers. These magical powers came to be inexorably linked with healing

⁴² H.Fisher, 1971:38.

⁴³ It has been shown in chapter 2 (pp. 94-99) that Muslims encouraged an aura of secrecy which they usually harnessed for their own advantage - by mystifying Islam and cultivating fear in other people, they made up for their low social esteem.

powers, with the result that their medical skills were much sought after, especially because they claimed the ability to cure the more intractable diseases like barrenness and madness, and provide protective charms. It is a commonly held belief among the local people that these two types of illness are caused either by witchcraft or other social forces such as curse, which is believed to be extremely efficacious.⁴⁴ Therefore, to those who hold this belief, the treatment of these types of illness is outside the realm of the western-trained medical doctors and only the sheikh and or other diviners are considered to possess the necessary skills to make the right diagnosis and deal with the cases effectively. It is for this reason that some of the local people consult the sheikh instead of going to the hospital. Therefore, to a great many people, both Muslim and non-Muslim, talismans can protect those who possess them against potential sorcerers and witches.

Though the sheikhs did not put their services up for sale, so to say, there was an economic dimension to it. The sheikhs earned a living by giving these services, and since the services were considered vital by their recipients (most of whom were non-Muslims) they were willing to pay in cash and kind for them. The most popular reward was in the form of goat, perhaps because the goat was the traditional unit of currency among the Meru. However, a different opinion is given by one of my informants, who suggests that the sheikhs, realizing the degree of the local people's fear of witches, harnessed it for their own advantage and charged exorbitant fees in cash and kind for their services.⁴⁵ They cast a spell on the people. Their visits, which happened two or three times a year, and extended for nearly

⁴⁴ The fear of the efficacy of curse among the Meru has been illustrated in the case of the 'Njia curse' in chapter 2, pp. 113-114.

⁴⁵ Aslam (interview, Amaku, 11th October 1991) claims the ability to cure many diseases. He takes after his father, a leading adherent of the order of Abdul Qadir Jailan in the area.

two months on each occasion,⁴⁶ were characterized by much festivity at the homes of their supporters which, as has just been said, served as their bases for healing, divination and other services for their clients.

However, it would be erroneous to give the impression that the cult operated on a large scale in this area. It must be pointed out that though the recruitment to the cult, as Lewis notes, is usually "through illness and affliction",⁴⁷ there is no evidence to suggest that treatment was linked with conversion to Islam. Many of the sheikhs' clients sought just remedy for their maladies, and were not inclined to conversion. Nor were the sheikhs, as I have just said above, eager to spread the cult beyond a small circle of adherents. Here there is no evidence of spirit possession akin to Parkin's "therapeutic" Muslims among the Giriama.⁴⁸ Even in a case such as that of Nchulubi,⁴⁹ the mental illness that bedeviled her family, claiming her husband and her son, were not perceived in terms of spirit possession. Her quest for Islam was a quest for protection against the harm supposedly caused her by an envious neighbour.

Thus the cult was sustained not so much by its own vitality as the local people's fear of the inexplicable charisma of the sheikhs. Since Muslims were relatively few and far apart in this area, and not all were members of the order, the sheikhs' supporters were usually zealous prominent Muslim men, whose support bolstered the image of the order in the eyes of local people, which in turn, enhanced their social status. On

⁴⁶ Asuman, to whom I am indebted for this information, still hosts the sheikhs in his home, though now only for treatment of the sick and divinatory consultations.

⁴⁷ I. M. Lewis, 1985:69.

⁴⁸ D. J. Parkin, 1972:40.

⁴⁹ This case is discussed in detail in chapter 6, pp.282-289.

these occasions, the sheikhs treated the sick, made talismans, and attended to those who came to consult or seek help in tracing lost items.

A remark needs be made here about the representation of the cult of Sheikh Hussein of Bale in Meru. The concept of *ayaana* is an element of Borana and not Meru culture, therefore, the sheikhs seem to have adapted certain *ayaana* rituals to a different milieu, perhaps by down-playing them, in order to bring the cult of Sheikh Hussein to prominence. For instance Sheikh Mwinyi (already mentioned) who claims to have been first initiated into Qadiriyya and then Husseiniiyya, sees *ayaana* as possessing members of the cult for "misdeeds" and non-members as a "calling".⁵⁰ What the sheikh meant to say in this statement which I have rendered into English, is that since *ayaana* manifests itself in the form of spirit possession, if an initiated individual is affected by *ayaana*, it is believed that s/he must have done something to warrant the attack; but if a non-member is 'affected' it is an invitation to enter the cult.

During the period of their visit, which lasted for several weeks, ceremonies to avert evil were held in the members' homes, usually on Thursdays and Fridays. Though these sessions were rarely held to deal with cases of illness or possession by *ayaana*, as is the case among the Borana they are comparable to those described by Aguilar.⁵¹ I have just said that though most of the people who consulted the sheikh did so in search of remedy for their various maladies, they were not treated as possessed by a spirit. The explanation for this omission may^{be} found in the absence of the concept of spirit possession among the Meru. There are various causes of barrenness and other intractable illnesses: an individual may have been bewitched or violated a certain taboo incurring the condition of ritual impurity known as *muiro* for which a prescribed cleansing ritual is

⁵⁰ Interview with Sheikh Mwinyi, Meru town, 16th November 1991.

⁵¹ M. I. Aguilar, 1994:254-282.

performed by an expert. Here some individuals preferred the Muslim sheikh to the Meru traditional medical/ritual expert on the basis of the novelty of Muslim medicine. Some people wanted to try it just because it was new to them.⁵²

While among the Borana the customary possession by *ayaana* furnished the occasion for the performance of the rituals which also served as the medium for expressing allegiance to Husseinyya, in Meru ceremonies to avert evil provided an opportune time for cult members to meet regularly. Ceremonies to avert evil were held on Thursday or Friday evenings at the homes of members:

1. Members were invited to attend.
2. A new pot was placed near the entrance and green coffee, milk butter and sugar were kept aside.
3. Coffee berries were fried by the woman of the house, that is the wife of the house owner.
4. After frying the berries, she scooped them with a calabash from the pot and steeped them in fresh butter. Then every one touched and applied a little butter to their faces and legs.
5. Then the berries were passed round for the elders and all the participants to pick up the berries one by one and eat them. After each person had 3 to 4 berries, the remainder should not be finished, some should be left and returned to the woman who fried them.
6. The rest of the evening was spent singing praises for the Sheikh Hussein and chanting remembrance, *dhikir*.⁵³

⁵² The preference for the Muslim cleric's remedies to those of the traditional expert, in many cases without conversion is alluded to in chapter 7, p. 320.

⁵³ The session was described to me by Mustafa (Kiengu, 12th October 1991) and Sheikh Hussam, (Amaku, 13th October 1991).

It is important to emphasize Husseiniyya is intimately expressed through Borana traditional rituals, though there may be variations in the application or adaptation of these rituals in Meru as this particular ceremony illustrates. For instance, though this session whose purpose is to avert evil, differs slightly from the one observed by Aguilar among the Waso Borana,⁵⁴ coffee is an important common ritual item. The coffee dish used in the ritual is a Borana traditional

sacrament of peace and fertility. Traditionally the coffee fruit has been used to help moments of prayer... The bean itself has the connotation of prosperity and the butter that of fertility and abundance.⁵⁵

The sheikhs introduced the ritual of burying the heads of animals slaughtered for meat as a protective measure for the home in which the animal was slaughtered. They also introduced a three-hundred-bead white rosary, *tasbih*, believed to be more potent than the ordinary one. It was oiled and worn on the shoulder as a sign of the order. A former member of the order now turned reformer, said that this *tasbih* was believed to be so potent that if an uninitiated person used it, s/he would suffer grave consequences, usually the victim would become insane, unless certain rituals were performed to cleanse the victim, after which they would be initiated into the order by the senior sheikh. Members were encouraged to wear long hair, purported to be the abode of the *pepo*, spirit. This was the symbol of the cult where initiation and magical protection were the prime elements.

Basing their argument on the Quranic prohibition of consumption of intoxicants, the sheikhs condemned the chewing of *miraa*, that is *carthas*

⁵⁴ M. I. Aguilar, 1994:278.

⁵⁵ M.I. Aguilar, 1991:35-6.

edulis,⁵⁶ which is a popular habit among both the local people, the Somali and the Borana. They argued that *miraa* fell within the Quranic definition of intoxicants. This led to an unprecedented controversy with the Muslims involved in both its trade and consumption. However, the sheikhs do not seem to have made any headway in their fight against this highly valued commodity.

'Every Sheikh has his Own Way'⁵⁷

The most influential of these sheikhs was a Borana Sheikh Hiloli.⁵⁸ From his base at Kiengu, he managed to surround himself with a group of supporters from among the local pioneer converts, owing allegiance to his cult.⁵⁹ The sheikh was and still is feared for his magical powers. My informants were in agreement that he can cure all kinds of diseases and is especially renowned for his unrivaled skill in treating a sort of spirit possession, popularly known as '*pepo ya jinn*'; madness and barrenness. However, there is no evidence to suggest the practice of spirit possession

⁵⁶ *Miraa*, (*Carthas Edulis*), is grown in Igembe region of Meru district. The bark of the young shoots is chewed for leisure and it is the major cash crop for the people in the area - it is sold in many parts of the country, mainly the North-Eastern Province, Nairobi and Mombasa, all with significant Muslim populations.

⁵⁷ 'Every Sheikh has his own way' is a well known Arabic saying. In this case, the lack of consensus among the sheikhs was expressed in this idiom.

⁵⁸ On a visit to the home of one prominent local Muslim, I was fortunate to find the highly revered Sheikh Hiloli, to whom I am grateful for much of the information in this section. He said that he was born in 1911 at Garba Tulla. In 1928, he joined other traders at Mutuati trade centre, which had been opened in the previous year. He says that he has lived in Igembe for most of his life.

⁵⁹ With the impetus provided particularly by the secessionist tendencies since the 1950s, religious orders were quite active in the N.F.D. throughout this period. See chapter 4.

among the Meru Muslim converts. When I visited him at a home of a prominent local Muslim, his host described him rather modestly:

The sheikh, to us, is only a helper when need arises. For instance, if any one is ill, he can and in fact does give treatment. In the whole of Meru, only this Sheikh and sheikh Mwinyi (previously mentioned) are fully qualified to deal with all types of illness, though there are other minor healers. There is a specific book for this treatment, and this task can only be performed by the experts who are initiated into it. It is not just anybody that could handle this without serious repercussions. A few others, for instance Sheikh Musa, have given up this work due to the reformist influence.⁶⁰

Another important sheikh came to the area in the early 1970s, (various informants gave different dates) and established himself at Kaburi, a few miles away from Kiengu. It should, however be remembered that by the time the second Sheikh arrived, Sheikh Hiloli had already established his reputation among the local people. It seems, therefore, that for the new sheikh to make a mark in this new territory, which was somewhat within the Sheikh Hiloli's 'sphere of influence', he had to demonstrate his magical skills in order to attract a following and hopefully carve out his own 'sphere of influence'. This he achieved with rapid success since many people, both Muslim and non-Muslims valued the services offered by the sheikhs. It is also said that he was an eloquent preacher and a number of converts were won through his preaching.

However, it would be erroneous to give the impression that Sheikh Umari (the second sheikh) established himself without difficulty in Hiloli's domain. There is evidence in the accounts of several informants who claim to have witnessed the encounter between the two sheikhs, to show that the two "men of learning" soon began to disagree on various doctrinal issues.

⁶⁰ The mystical powers attributed to these sheikhs and the immense reverence accorded them, were some of the aspects of this sheikh cult in Igembe that *Tabligh* teachers were quick to condemn. See chapter 6, pp. 261-262.

Most thorny of these was the question of whether or not to deliver *Khutba*, the Friday sermon, to a gathering of fewer than forty male worshippers, as stipulated by the Shafi school of Islamic law. Sheikh Hiloli explained to me that the disagreement between him and the other sheikh derived mainly from the fact that the latter leaned more towards the Malik school than the Shafi. Hiloli argued that according to the Shafi school of Muslim law, an Imam should not deliver Friday sermon in a mosque if the attendance fell below forty resident male worshippers. But the second sheikh countered that in the circumstances where it was difficult to gather forty resident male worshippers due to the sparsity of Muslims in the area, ten men fulfilled the basic requirement for an Imam to give *khutba* on Friday. As a result, he would deliver *Khutba* at Mangala even when the attendance fell far below the Shafi stipulation.

Another point of disagreement between the sheikhs was the rate of payment of *zakat*, alms for the poor. At one time they gave different rates, with the result that some prominent traders in Kangeta threatened to withhold their payment until the sheikhs came to a consensus. With each sheikh basing his advice on his own understanding of the law, or "his own way", as my informant put it, it proved difficult to attain consensus. Sheikh Hiloli says that the problem as he saw it, was the second sheikh's tendency to lean towards the Malik school of thought and thus give rise to a difference in emphasis on certain details between the two schools (Malik and Shafi), which though minor, might engender confusion and hence disorient the rather feeble converts. He felt that since the local Muslim converts, to whom Sheikh Umari was ministering, were Shafi, he should adhere to the Shafi prescriptions to avoid any confusion that might arise if the Maliki bias crept in.⁶¹

⁶¹ Interview with sheikh Hiloli, Antubetwe mosque, 16th October 1991.

Of course the converts understood little about the fundamentals of faith, let alone the intricate details of the Muslim law, so to most of them, the disagreement between the two sheikhs was reduced to competition and rivalry. This could well be another way of seeing the struggle between the learned sheikhs. Taking into account the fact that the new sheikh was trying to carve out an area of influence for himself, it is likely that his arrival was viewed as an intrusion by the other sheikh. In fact several informants who claimed to know both sheikhs well, insisted that to them, what appeared to be subtle details of law were of little significance.

Since the early 1970s, the sheikhs of the former N.F.D. were active in providing Islamic remedies for various maladies for those who sought them, Muslim and non-Muslim alike. However, except for the formation of a small band^{of} supporters calling themselves 'people of *Murid*', this cult made little impact upon the people in Igembe. Just as the influence of the Borana tenants in Meru town were constricted by the leaders, the cult in Igembe did not actually 'make it'. The advent of *Tabligh* in the beginning of the 1980s saw a quick exit of Husseiniyya supporters.

Conclusion

Launay in his study of the introduction of a new ritual "that never 'quite made it'"⁶² among the Dyula Muslims in Senegal, observed that there is a tendency to perceive change in the context of retrospection

If one considers only those changes that have successfully been adopted, history tends to take an aura of inevitability with 'past' and 'present' as two points on a vector leading in a certain direction. Such a teleological view can obscure the obvious fact that changes are often the outcomes of conscious decisions by specific individuals. Such decisions, however, carry the risk of failure. The circumstances in

⁶² R. Launay, 1992:147.

which individuals fail to institute certain changes tell us as much, in the long run, as the circumstances in which they succeed.⁶³

The relevant point from Launay's discussion in this passage, is that those changes and events that do not quite "make it" or produce the desired effect, are as informative about the circumstances in which they occur as those that do make it and therefore, such events should be accorded no less attention. Following Launay, therefore, it can be said that though the sheikh cult in Meru was short lived, its emergence and failure to entrench itself communicates something of the local model of Islamic worship and hence deserves attention here.

A relevant point to consider in the above discussion of the sheikhs is the timing of their arrival: they arrived at a time when, as has been shown in the previous chapter, the Muslim enclaves within Meru town were on the threshold of unity as they were struggling to construct a common Muslim identity. The group distinctiveness that might have surrounded the Borana religious ceremonies and rituals would find no place in the emerging urban Muslim community in Meru Town.

However, the Muslims in Igembe, isolated, few and far between, and well aware of their lack of Muslim learning, were more susceptible to the Borana influence than their counterparts in the "New Swahili village", now merged with Nubian village. Whether or not the Borana sheikhs had sufficient Muslim learning was not the issue to the Muslim families scattered in the area, most of whom knew little or nothing about Islamic learning. While in Meru town a Borana sheikh would be subjected to the scrutiny of the more authoritative Sheikh Said, for instance, whose credentials were obtained through 'recognized' scholarship at the coast, and therefore accredited by the members of the community, in Igembe they

⁶³ R. Launay, 1992:148.

filled a gap - the sheikh cited above said that "none of our own people was learned enough to preside over the *maulid* celebrations", so these sheikhs were welcome.

This is in agreement with Constantin that

to be admired one must have admirers. In other words, circumstances must favour a particular sensitivity towards the exceptional. At certain periods certain social groups may be particularly exposed.⁶⁴

Possession of *baraka* (imputed to the sheikhs) and the ability to read Arabic, made them appear extraordinary and therefore more than qualified to preside over the Maulid.

It was this situation in Igembe that somewhat favoured the formation of a small circle of cult members. The functions that the sheikhs performed were the preserve of men considered to have access to secret knowledge. It was the situation in Igembe that favoured "the germination of charisma",⁶⁵ to quote Constantin again, that was rightly attributed to these sheikhs.

⁶⁴ F. Constantin, 1988:79.

⁶⁵ F. Constantin, 1988:80.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE INTERNAL DYNAMICS OF THE MAJENGO MUSLIM COMMUNITY

Introduction

In this chapter I intend to examine the functioning of the Muslim community in Meru town through a study of the various activities and group affiliations, in other words, the intricate web of the social-religious network that is characteristic of the Muslim residents of Majengo.¹ The picture of the urban community would be incomplete without the discussion on the role of the resident Asian Muslims.² Though they do not live within the precincts of Majengo and Mjini, they play an important role in the town's social-religious network. The salient aspects of this network are: power relations, that is the means by which certain individual Muslims exert influence, authority and power within the Muslim community; general expectations of others as members of the community, and the means of enforcing and evaluating the fulfillment of these expectations. The data for this chapter were derived mainly from participant observation. My participation in many of the local activities was particularly helpful leading to first-hand contact with many Majengo residents in their homes.

¹ As said in chapter 1 (p.26) *Majengo* in Swahili means buildings. But the term has come to denote cheap low income residential areas, usually with a predominantly Swahili-Islamic character, in what were formally designated "African locations" in the administrative centres founded by the colonial administrators in the interior of Kenya.

² See chapter 1 (pp.41-45) for information on the establishment of the Indian Bazaar and presence of Indian Muslims of Sunni, Shia (Ismaili) and Ahmadiyya sects in Meru.

The Spatial Significance of Majengo

The Muslim enclaves of Majengo and Mjini³ are separated from each other by the upper part of Meru town. Majengo lies on the ridge beyond the Kathita river, straddled by a foot-bridge at one of the narrower points of its deep canyon just below Majengo. The main bridge across the Kathita is further down on Nkubu road. A significant number of the old mud-and-wood tin roofed "Swahili houses" are still there, though an effort to "improve the settlement", as its residents put it, is evident in the wooden structures that are gradually replacing the mud-walled houses when they collapse. The tall minarets of the magnificent stone mosque, built in 1986 by the Islamic Foundation on a piece of land donated by Al-Hajji,⁴ tower over these structures in a striking contrast between its white-washed walls and the surrounding rusty tin roofs.

The Nubian village is on the other ridge beyond the town, and similarly separated from the upper part of the town by a small stream. The new hospital wing overlooks a row of 11 mud-and-wood houses occupying the lower part of the ridge. Beyond the hospital, other similar houses are scattered haphazardly. A tin (*mabati*) mosque stands rather inconspicuously beside a small dusty street.⁵

For the residents of both places either to visit one another or go to town, they have to "cross over to the other side", as I heard it said many times. In spite of this geographical setting, whatever happens in one place -

³ Mjini is the name given to the area occupied by both the Nubian Village and what in 1954/55 became known as the "New Swahili Village", created for those evacuated from the old Swahili village. Twenty-nine house owners were resettled here.

⁴ Interview with Al-Hajji, Majengo mosque, 2nd August 1991.

⁵ For a fuller description of the physical location of the Majengo, see chapter 1, pp. 35-40.

marriage, funeral or gossip - rarely escapes the attention of the people on the other side of the town. Therefore, for the purpose of our discussion the two entities will be treated as one Muslim community. According to Peil, the term community

usually implies some idea of locale, frequent social interaction and close ties between members of a group. These ties may be based on kinship, common occupation, the experience of living together, etc., so long as they are sufficiently important to provide the members of the community with common interests and goals. Some uses of community omit locale and argue that community interests ignore distance (a community of scientists, who might live all over the world). But residence in the same area is important in providing opportunity for interaction and working together for common goals, even though technology helps to overcome distance, it seems more useful to keep the idea of common residence and use some other word for close knit groups which lack this.⁶

The spatiality, in other words, the existence of a geographical place that is constructed and identifiable as a Majengo, upon which the strands of interaction and close ties within the group are crucially dependent, fulfills the pertinent criterion of locale. In the Majengo situation, every individual has a network of relatives, neighbours and friends who, through their shared adherence of communalism, are not only more likely, but are obligated, to act together and assist one of their number in need. It is this network that makes^{the} Majengo Muslim community different from the Muslims scattered in the rural areas without a common Muslim community identity. Locale, in this case the spatiality of Majengo, is vital for the construction of a common Muslim community identity in Meru. As Anthony Cohen suggests

the reality of community lies in its members' perception of the vitality of its culture. People construct community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning...⁷

⁶ M. Peil, 1977:19.

⁷ Anthony Cohen, 1985:118.

In this case the criteria for differentiation or elements of distinctiveness, as I have referred to them before, are: mode of dress; use of Swahili as a language of community; and other forms of Swahili-Islamic material culture which are perceived as marks that distinguish Muslims from others.⁸ For the Muslims in Meru Town, the process of community identity construction is facilitated by the spatiality of Majengo. The phrase "Majengo people" has a different connotation from "Majengo residents". The *real* Majengo people do not see themselves as 'residing' there for they say of themselves, "we are the Majengo and there is no Majengo without us".⁹ The notion of a geographical place for Muslims, usually expressed as *mji wetu*, in spite of the presence of others who are not necessarily part of the Majengo Muslim community. In the early period the elders used to collect the tax money from all the residents and deliver it to the district administration in order "to keep the police out the settlement".¹⁰ Keeping control of the settlement meant keeping out various forms of external influence, for instance the Borana living in Mjini were threatened with eviction if they persisted in their *Ayaana* celebrations which according to the elders, were regarded as unislamic. Now they are gradually losing the hold on this area as many other people move in and the municipal council threat to demolish the old houses looms even larger. This notion of a geographical place for Muslims is comparable to that found in Ujiji by Balda.

⁸ For a fuller discussion on the process and mechanisms of the construction of a common Muslim community identity and distinctiveness in Meru town, see chapter 3, pp. 149-170.

⁹ Interview with Musa, Mzee Ibrahim and Nyanya, 7th September 1991. The threat of the demolition of Majengo by the Meru Municipal Council has been in the air for a long time now and my informants expressed concern for the future of their settlement and all that it symbolizes.

¹⁰ Interview with Mzee Ibrahim, Majengo 26th August 1991. Ironically, nowadays, the police carry out daily raids in an attempt to curb brewing of illicit liquor.

Muslims in Ujiji, Tanzania, consider it of vital importance to keep the Islamic character of their town not only by controlling future Christian movements, but also by keeping at bay any other Muslim groups...¹¹

Living in close proximity enhances the vitality of the Swahili-Islamic culture. As I have said elsewhere¹² once they are established, the Muslim settlements become cultural islands, an attribute which not only facilitates but also deepens the process of Islamization. Therefore both locale and criteria of differentiation are crucially important for a common Muslim community identity formation in Meru.

The significance of locale can be illustrated further by drawing upon the following statement made by one of my informants, when asked to explain why they tend to stick together in Majengo. Sheikh Abdallah of Majengo felt that:

We Muslims are one community. The Muslim brotherhood obligates us to help one another. That is why you see in Majengo the Muslims live as brothers, one with another. Now if an individual lives alone out there, that is in a place without other Muslims or others who understand the religion of Islam, it may be difficult for such an individual to fulfil his religious obligations. For instance Muchena, the owner of the house at that end of the row, was a devout Muslim who observed a regular mosque attendance. When he moved from Majengo to his village in Mutuati in the 1960s, we even thought that he would try to spread Islam among his neighbours. But see what happened - after a few years there, he stopped attending the annual Maulid celebrations. He stopped going to the mosque. Finally, he abandoned his religion altogether. Only his children bear Muslim names, otherwise there is no trace of Islam in their lives. In fact they are not Muslims. They are just like the rest of the people living around them. That is what is likely to happen to individuals if we do not stick together as Muslims - even though Majengo is what it is.¹³

¹¹ J. L. Balda, 1990:302.

¹² See chapter 1 (p. 36) for the definition of Majengo as a cultural entity.

¹³ Interview with Sheikh Khalid, Majengo, 26th August 1991.

Abdallah's statement shows clearly that membership in the Majengo community sustains practice and ensures conformity. Without intending to overstate the case for Muslim brotherhood or unity, the point to note is that the Muslims ascribe a great deal of importance to their being together in a Majengo social and physical setting. Also, the process of enforcing and evaluating conformity to what is socially acceptable and expected of a Muslim, is to a large extent, enhanced by the physical setup of Majengo. A good example is the proximity of the mosque. Two informants said that they consider it a privilege to live next door to the mosque.¹⁴ It is a shame, they said, for one living so close to the mosque to fail to observe the five daily prayers regularly, especially because whenever the call to prayer is made, it reverberates in the roofs of their houses.

The call to prayer is heard in every corner of Majengo and indeed, all conversation ceases during the time when the caller's voice is heard and silence is maintained until the call is finished. I observed that even those without the intention of attending the prayers observe silence while the call is going on. The explanation given by my informants for this behaviour, even when one has no intention of answering the call either by praying wherever they are or by going to the mosque, is that it is considered religiously incorrect to interject while the call to prayer is being made, because the declaration of Allah's Greatness should supersede any other utterances. The call to prayer serves as a constant reminder of one of the most important religious obligations, it pricks the conscience of the believer five times a day. The point here is to illustrate the significance of the Majengo setup in which the proximity of the mosque can enhance religious consciousness, unlike the sparsity of mosques in the rural areas where the equally sparse Muslims have to trek, as will be shown in the next chapter, for long distances to go to the nearest mosque.

¹⁴ Interview with Mzee Ibrahim and Musa, Majengo, 7th September 1991.

Power Relations and Muslim Discourse

The concept of permanency in Majengo, (though this is now haunted by the imminent (proposed) demolition of Majengo by the town council, and hence the destruction of their community) is crucial to the sustenance of the Majengo religious and social network. The house owners and their families are permanent town residents, with few or no connections with the rural areas. Majengo is the place that they know and identify with as Muslims.¹⁵ They constitute the core group in Majengo and, as it will be shown below, play a significant role in maintaining the religious and social network in Majengo.

With the recent increase in the town's population, the availability of cheap housing in Majengo has attracted a number of new residents that my informants describe as "outsiders". A good proportion of these outsiders are women. Many women migrate from rural areas into town in search of jobs; others leave their homes after broken marriages; and some others simply "go out in search of easy town life", as one such woman put it. Most of these women end up in the town's low income residential areas, one of which is Majengo. After settling in, some of them are joined by their relatives who help to swell the Majengo population. Similarly, Dutto found out that in Nyeri town, the sex ratio varies appreciably between the different areas, "with an excess of women in Majengo".¹⁶ In her study of African women, Obbo identifies various categories of women who migrate to towns; and the

¹⁵ It is only recently that a number of long-time residents of Majengo and Mjini obtained plots of land in the newly developed agricultural schemes in formerly dry uninhabited areas in the district. I traced six of my informants to these schemes. One sheikh has stationed his first wife in the scheme, while the youngest stayed with him in the town. Another man has moved his family, leaving behind his father and mother, to the scheme and settled there. Through his efforts, a mosque has been built in this area.

¹⁶ C. A. Dutto, 1975:106.

various reasons that precipitate the migration.¹⁷ She concludes that "Unattached single women are ubiquitous in East African cities and towns, in contrast to the rural areas".¹⁸

Muslims (it may be partly in response to this presence of many non-Muslims in their midst) are manifestly conscious of their Muslim identity. This Muslim consciousness is expressed in the phrase "we Muslims" that one hears in almost every conversation among Muslims or between Muslims and non-Muslims. When asked about non-Muslim Majengo residents, the tendency was to give a disinterested response: "What do you want to know about them. Most of them are tenants here".¹⁹ It is important, therefore, to note that they are regarded as 'insiders' in Majengo; and at the same time, as 'outsiders' to the Muslim community.

On the surface, the Majengo Muslims appear as a united group, whose common adherence to Islam and the local variant of the Swahili culture, with its dense network of social ties, transcends individual differences and personal interests. To a visitor, the scenario of *leso*-clad women sitting in front of their houses enjoying the morning sunshine and children clattering around, as they play in the mud in the space between the rows of houses, gives a sense of false tranquility. Muslim men are seen walking around in their embroidered skull caps, and those who are supposedly more pious than others, in their long shirts (*kanzu*) and turbans

¹⁷ C. Obbo, 1974:71-80.

¹⁸ Most women in the Majengo of many towns, "are limited in their activity to petty trading...illicit selling of local beer, and to various forms of prostitution (C. A. Dutto, 1975:106). Also see C. Obbo, 1974:18. It is this form of survival activities which has given *mtaa*, and Majengo in general, pejorative connotations. Thus *mtaa* (singular) or *mitaa*, has come to be associated in the minds of many people with loose living.

¹⁹ Interview with Musa, Majengo, 23rd October 1991.

wound over the skull caps.²⁰ Those who have to go to work early in the morning (though these are few), cross on the foot-bridge to the other side into town. For the rest, the mornings are usually slow. It is not until about eleven-thirty that people begin to walk towards the town, where they "talk to other people" so as to catch up with the news before the afternoon prayer time (for those that observe regular mosque attendance). Great value is placed on "talking to other people".²¹ They meet and exchange news and views about what is happening: politics, social welfare, religious affairs etc.

This is a society where everyone knows everyone else. Categories of relationships seem to overlap at various points, for instance one is kin and neighbour; or neighbour and friend. Every family has an extensive network of kinship and friendship. At the primary level though, are the family ties. It is quite common to find relatives and their families living close together, either in the 'out-houses'²² of the main house or as next-door neighbours. As will be shown below, this close-knit nature of the community generates its own forces within the community's network of relationship.

A conceptual model of the Majengo Muslim community would consist of a four-tier pyramid: at the apex are the most prominent Muslim leaders, who may also be influential business men or politicians. It is believed that high profile for one member can benefit the community which sees itself as financially handicapped. For instance, Al-Hajji is a prominent Muslim leader who combines big business with participation in the local politics. For him, the two sources of prestige, that is big business and a leading role in the local political scene, reinforce each other and thus become a great

²⁰ To many, the mode of dress is not only a sign, but also a gauge of the degree of piety. See chapter 3, pp. 162-163.

²¹ Interview with Musa, Mzee Ibrahim, and Asuman, Majengo, 26th August, 1991. They were unanimous that it is "important to cross over to town and Mjini just to know what is happening".

²² See the description of the 'out-houses' in chapter 1, p. 39.

source of patronage for the town's Muslims. The community seems to have entrusted its welfare to him in that they look up to him for assistance in finding jobs and more importantly, for help from the local, national and even international agencies. For example, through his efforts, an appeal was made in 1990 to an international organization to fund a proposed project for the electrification of Majengo.²³

The obtaining of such financial aid for community projects helps to improve the individual's prestige within the community. I often heard it said: "we Muslims have no power. Only Al-Hajji has the power (financial and political)." Despite the Al-Hajji's efforts there is severe economic hardship. Outright regret for their diminished fortunes is openly expressed and references to a better past which compares unfavourably with the present are common. Both women and men express a feeling of disillusionment:

Our fathers were the pioneers in this place but they did not seem to have any foresight to invest in the future of their children. Take my father, for example, he worked for the colonial government for a long time until his retirement, but he did not invest his money. We had a much better childhood than most of our neighbours and the future did not matter then. Now you see what has happened over the years - even this house, which is the only thing that we inherited, is likely to be lost when the settlement is demolished (as they say it will be in not the too distant future) to give way for the construction of better housing.²⁴

However, it must be noted that, in spite of the group's declining economic situation throughout the post-independent period, a sense of Muslim community identity continues to sustain Majengo as an entity in itself.

²³ See "Meru Town mini-Project": proposal for improvement of Majengo social amenities, Municipal Council Office. Though the community are aware of the demolition threat, there is hope that if the social amenities are improved, the idea of demolition might be shelved.

²⁴ Interview with Musa, Majengo, 7th September 1991.

In the second tier are individuals whose influence in the community has no political or economic basis. These are the Sheikhs who derive their authority from their possession of the treasured Muslim learning. As one of my informants said "one who knows and one who does not know, cannot be equal".²⁵ Unlike the autonomous leaders in the Sabon Gari mentioned in the previous chapter,²⁶ their authority and knowledge in religious matters does not give them any political influence or power. It should also be pointed out here that the criteria for being thought learned are not the same in Meru as those on the coast. The local sheikh may not be considered an authoritative theologian or *alim* by coastal standards, but he knows more than the rest of the people around him, and this knowledge contributes considerably to the appreciation of his religious and social prominence.²⁷

Included in this category, are certain individuals who derive prestige and esteem from previous personal history and experience, for instance ex-soldiers from the two World Wars and retired policemen, and any other such people, who are widely travelled and therefore are believed to be (and in deed many of them are) more knowledgeable than the rank and file of the Muslims. It is such individuals who are elected to represent Meru Muslims both at the local and provincial branches of the various National Muslim organizations and associations.²⁸

²⁵ Interview with Sheikh Ahmed, Mjini, 26th October 1991.

²⁶ For the contrast between the role of the autonomous, politically and economically powerful leaders of the Sabon Gari in Nigerian towns, and the elders in Majengo, see chapter 3 pp. 150-152.

²⁷ F. Constantin (1988 *passim*), in his study of charisma in East Africa, gives an interesting treatment to the source and nature of the sheikhs' charisma.

²⁸ There are district, provincial and national branches of all the major national Muslim organizations and associations, for instance, the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims (SUPKEM), Young Muslim Association, etc.

In the third tier are some of the older men and women pioneers and first generation Muslims. Among the Meru, and many other African peoples, age is respected as a source of wisdom. Their role as elders of the community will be discussed below. Perhaps in this category we can include a few individuals who, either due to possession of some western education, or by being ingenious, have a regular source of income (however small) as an office junior, a paid driver or a kiosk owner. Though they have a relatively lower participation in the community affairs than the other two categories, they have, nevertheless a certain role to play within the Majengo social-religious matrix. For instance Ali, an office messenger in one of the offices in town is an active anti-*maulid* activist, and his wife is an active member of one of the women's self-help groups.

In the bottom rank are the majority with least participation in the community affairs. A significant proportion of these are women and young people; however, it should be remembered that leadership of the community is traditionally in the hands of men.

As shown above, social and even political alignments of members of the community are continually shifting, and individuals with regular jobs (though these are few) are usually turned into supporters for one rival group or the other.²⁹ In these circumstances of limited resources, religious

²⁹ For instance, when I started my research in July 1991, I was introduced at the mosque and many social gatherings by the most prominent Muslim leader. But soon I noticed that some people were not only reluctant, but also bluntly refused to see me or grant me an interview. When I probed further, I learnt that they were in a different camp, opposed to the leader who had introduced me. Indeed it was difficult for me to convince some of them that I was not aligned to any side. An interesting incident happened one day when, after three-hour long interview with an Imam, we broke for lunch only to return later and find him furious because during the break, he found out that I had been to see his rival with a view to interviewing him. The Imam was so enraged that he cancelled any further interviews and even withdrew his promise to let me peruse through two files with information concerning the mosque which were in his possession. He also recanted all that he had told me and even suggested that I should erase the notes that I

representation must work through clientelistic paths of leadership and patronage, where it offers access to the much needed financial support for the religious cause, even from sources other than Muslim. This point can be illustrated by the case of the row in 1989 between the supporters of a powerful local politician, a non-Muslim, and his opponents. He offered to donate money for the celebration of *maulid*, this caused a big rift in the Muslim community: those against, argued that the use of unclean money from suspect sources would invalidate the *maulid* celebrations and that his offer was politically motivated. They suspected that the ulterior motive was to "buy" their votes. Those for argued that the source of the money would not affect the religious value of the celebration. The controversy revolved around the appropriateness of receiving money or accepting sponsorship for such an important Islamic festival from one considered to be an unbeliever. The congregation was split during the celebrations, and the opponents who withdrew sponsored another *maulid* celebration within a week after that.³⁰

Since, as has been suggested above, unity among Meru Muslims is an ideal rather than a reality, it is necessary to point out that the notion of a common Muslim community identity does not always engender unity. As will be shown below, shifting local social alignments are usually reflected in religious practice, and discord among Muslims manifests itself in the pattern of mosque attendance. Some of the shifts in social alignment could be seen as highlighting the general interplay of statuses and power relations which affect the religious discourse within the town. This could be illustrated by the altercation between the various groups, representing the interests of leading personalities with whom they are aligned; and the local social and religious authority, embodied in the elders.

had taken during the interview with him that morning, 22nd November 1991.

³⁰ Interview with Mwanaisha and Mirza, Majengo, 24th October 1991.

The mosque is the meeting point and therefore, in most instances of discord, controversy revolves around it; controversy either over control of it or the choice of the Imam to lead the prayers. For instance:

After the demise of the well respected Sheikh Said who had served as the Imam of the Jamia mosque for many years, there was a leadership vacuum. His successor did not command an equal intensity of respect from all the sections of the Muslim community in the town, and it was not long before signs of discord began to emerge. Some people felt that he was unfit for the office, and some of the reasons given were that, though he was fluent in both Kiswahili and Arabic, his accent was unacceptable; and his appearance unbecoming of the stature of an Imam. In addition, he augmented his earnings by working in the slaughter house, which was considered disreputable for an Imam. Some people refused to pray behind him and when the disagreement assumed alarming proportions, his supporters appealed to the Chief Qadhi in Mombasa to intervene.

The Chief Qadhi dismissed good looks and any one accent as qualifications. He reiterated that proficiency in both languages was the minimum requirement, so as to ensure correct reading of the Quran without altering the meaning of the words, which there was no doubt the Imam satisfied. He also ruled that working in a slaughter house has no religious implication and therefore would not jeopardize the duties of the Imam. The Imam was reinstated and confirmed in his position by the intervention of the Chief Qadhi. Calm was restored but only temporarily.

It was not too long before the opponents, installed a new Imam in place of the embattled one. This time there was no attempt to mask the hostility between the antagonized sections of the Muslim community in Meru town. Once again the disagreement assumed a new dimension when it was realized that the new Imam could not communicate effectively with the majority of the Muslims, especially during the Friday sermon, due to his inability to speak Kiswahili or the local language - he spoke only Urdu and Arabic. Accordingly, a section of the community felt that his imposition was an outright violation of their rights and some of them preferred to pray outside the mosque rather than behind him.³¹

³¹ It is difficult to give the precise date when this controversy took place, but Mwanaidi and Sheikh Ahmed, to whom I am grateful for this information (interview, Mjini, November 20th 1991) said that the late Chief Qhadhi, Sheikh Saleh Farsy approved the appointment of the new Imam after the death of Sheikh Said. For information on the charismatic leadership of Sheikh Said, see chapter

Running through these differences is the issue of leadership of the Muslim community. The reasons given for the rejection of the first Imam seem rather trivial and it is possible that the real reason has more to do with his descent rather than his competence. He is a descendant of a convert, *mahaji*, and hence the complaint that his accent (which is local and therefore much less Arabized) is not good enough. The old wounds are being rubbed, so to say.³² From the Chief Qadhi's ruling, it is clear that the dissent has no theological basis. These are some of the ramifications of the shifting social alignments in the Meru Muslim community and their impact on the religious discourse in the local scene. The impact of these ramifications on the religious discourse in the local scene can be illustrated by an examination of the various dimensions of the controversy over the control of Jamia mosque.

The mosque, as Middleton observes,

is an important factor in the expression of conflicts and disputes between those of different rank and of claimed ethnic origins (the two being essentially the same but using different idioms). Conflicts are expressed largely in terms of which mosque is accepted as the Friday mosque...³³

Here, the mosque is used as a source of power by an individual or a group of individuals and to have control over the mosque, and in particular the Jamia mosque, ensures the exercise of a certain measure of control over the people who are organized around it. As has been shown elsewhere, the

3, p. 158.

³² See chapter 2 (p.81) for the distinction between the converts and those 'born in the faith'; and the attempts to obliterate the divisions along these lines in order to create a common Muslim identity in Meru town after independence, chapter 3, p. 167.

³³ J. Middleton, 1993:169.

different mosques in the town reflect the divisions among the Muslims.³⁴ For Majengo residents, for instance, it is really their new mosque - Al Azizia - in which they take real pride in proprietorship. The mosque serves as a symbol of group or community identity.

The Jamia mosque has been at the centre of a protracted battle between those who identify themselves as the 'African' Muslims and some members of the resident local Asian Muslim population.³⁵ There are several versions of the history of this mosque: one version says that, after the demolition of the old Swahili village in 1954/55 and the construction of the new bazaar in the then new township site, all the sections of the Muslim community contributed the money for the construction of the mosque. Prior to the construction of the present Jamia mosque on this site, it was occupied by a temporary mosque building which was used by both the Swahili and the Sunni Asians. In view of this, neither group could rightly claim to own the mosque building itself or the site.

The other version is that the 'Africans' made only a small contribution while the Asians undertook the construction. In addition they have continued to maintain the mosque throughout this period. As a result of this, some people, particularly the Asians, began to feel that after all, the mosque belongs to them. At the height of the tension between the two sections of the community, the Asians were challenged to "carry away what they considered as their mosque building (if this were possible) and leave the plot vacant for the construction of a mosque that would be accessible to

³⁴ There are 5 mosques within Meru Municipality. The old Majengo mosque which had fallen into disuse was now (during the time of my research in October 1991) being used by the supporters of *maulid* who felt that they could not pray shoulder to shoulder with the anti-*maulid* activists in the new magnificent mosque in Majengo.

³⁵ Since the early days, the presence of a "surplus Indian population" was described as a real problem for the local administration. See chapter 1, p. 44.

all the Muslims in the town".³⁶ The important point to note is that superiority in numbers was turned into an effective means of challenging what was considered to be Asian paternalism. As many people as possible were now encouraged to attend the mosque. For the first time, there was an urgent need to involve women who previously did not attend mosque. They were now encouraged to turn up in large numbers for Friday prayers. My informant explained that

this was a strategy to try and fill up the mosque hall, especially because the presence of so many African women would keep out Asian women who did not want to pray together with African women. Many women began to attend the mosque more regularly and the desired effect was achieved - we were able to assert ourselves and our right to the mosque.³⁷

The group that sees to the general administration of the mosque affairs, including maintenance, and pays the *madrassa* teacher, no doubt is seen to be fulfilling a religious obligation. Members of such a group gain respect and a higher social status, with the result that the mosque itself becomes their power base and thus pivotal to the usually thorny religious leadership issues. Thus the history of the mosque shows the Asian and African sections of the Meru Muslim community in a perpetual struggle for power. Claims and counter-claims by either group shade into the struggle for the control of the local religious affairs, in other words, access to power within the local social-religious matrix.

³⁶ Interview with Mwanaidi, Mjini, 28th October 1991.

³⁷ Mwanaidi explained that prior to this campaign to encourage women to pray at the mosque, most of them prayed at home except during the calendrical religious events when they turned up at the mosque in large numbers. When I visited the mosque, I found 30 women, mainly the older ones, praying in the hall behind the mosque. I was informed that the Asian women were praying in a different hall. Segregation of sexes at prayer as a rule, must be observed, but since there is no provision for a women's section in the main mosque building, they pray in the hall attached to the back of the mosque.

The pattern of mosque attendance in Meru is changing. This change can be ascribed to the reformist stance of the *Tabligh* advocates and its effect upon the existing social alignments. Previously, Friday prayers were held only in the Jamia mosque, but simultaneous prayers are held in the mosque which has been built recently at Mukutano, about a mile from the town centre, and is now managed by a religious organization which is said to be solely Asian. When I enquired whether the congregation was too large for the Jamia mosque on Fridays, the *madrassa* teacher said that Friday prayers were:

held at Mukutano initially for the nearby college and secondary school students who would have to walk along distance to the Jamia mosque in the centre of the town. But now other people have started to attend the Friday prayer there.³⁸

Whether or not this answer was to mask the real reason behind the new trend, it was not possible for me to ascertain. However, another informant said that: "now the situation has changed there is a choice and one is free to pray wherever s/he wants".³⁹ This particular informant was unwilling to respond to my suggestion that there was an emerging pattern of mosque attendance, which has more to do with the shifting social alignments, contingent upon the relationships between the influential personalities within the Muslim community, than simply choice for the immediate purpose of prayer. Two other informants, were in agreement that, now the choice between the two venues available for Friday prayer is inalienable from need to support the leading personalities.⁴⁰

³⁸ Interview with *Madrassa* teacher, Mukutano mosque, 10th November 1991.

³⁹ Interview with Musa, Majengo, 17th November 1991.

⁴⁰ The story of the "oppositional mosque" (*masjid al-dirar*) can be traced to the life time of the prophet when a mosque outside Medina was used as a base by members of an opposition group to stir up divisions among Muslims, (K. Zebir, 1993:211).

These leading personalities may be Asian or 'African' and, therefore, it would be misleading to emphasize the adversarial aspect of the relationship between the Asian and African sections of the Meru Muslim community and overlook the complexity of a situation in which they are, on various occasions, divided on certain issues affecting the entire community, and united on others; or to suggest that the community is clearly divided along racial lines on all the issues affecting them, and thus reduce the whole gamut of the intra-community dynamics merely to racial conflict. I have dealt in considerable detail, with the various dimensions of the battle over the control of the Jamia mosque, because it represents not only the tensions within, but also the functioning of the Muslim community in Meru. In other words, it represents the internal dynamics of the urban Meru Muslim community.

The *Maulid* Debate

The ordinary Muslim in Meru is not concerned with practice or orthodoxy, in other words, the propriety of religious behaviour, for the rightness and wrongness of the behaviour of the individual Muslim, are not judged so much on the basis of the 'official' Muslim view as on what is locally permissible. The controversy over the celebration of *Maulid* illustrates this point.

As is well known, in many parts of the Muslim world, there is a long standing controversy between those Muslims who consider the practice of celebrating *maulid* as an innovation (*bid'a*) that should be restricted, if not banned altogether, and those who regard the celebrations as socially important and religiously permissible. This controversy did not arise in Meru until the early 1980s, when it became inevitably linked with the

Tabligh campaign.⁴¹ Since then, it has been a most thorny issue among the Muslims. Though the controversy has its genesis in the Wahhabi reform at the coast,⁴² it is mainly the Asian⁴³ section of the Meru Muslim community which has carried out an aggressive campaign against *Maulid* celebration in Meru. My informant remembers that:

Sheikh Maulana from Pakistan (an advocate of *Tabligh*) began to propagate ideas about innovation (*bid'a*), objecting to western/Christian type of wedding ceremonies; use of protective charms (*hirizi*) which are quite popular with Muslims; reading of the Qur'an for protective or other purposes than the prescribed worship (*Ibadah*); the practice of mourning at the home of the bereaved neighbours and friends (*matanga*) and observance of 'the fortieth day' (*arubaini*). Since the mourners are fed at the home of the bereaved, he equated *matanga* to using the property of the orphaned, which is prohibited in the Quran. All these were quite popular practices and the Muslims found these reforms too far reaching to accept. He

⁴¹ *Tabligh*, as part of the current revivalist movement in many parts of the Muslim world; its general aims and objectives in Kenya; and its specific aims, influence and achievement in Meru are examined in chapter 6, pp. 245-246.

⁴² *Maulid* in Lamu (where it is perhaps the most celebrated) has received an interesting analysis from A. W. Boyd (1984 *passim*). Also see "The Prophet is Born" stories by M. Bakari, S. Yahya, M. M. Adam and F. Nahdi, *Africa Events* Vol.3 No.1, January/February 1987. The *Maulid* debate and conflict between those for and against the celebration of *Maulid* has been raging on the Kenyan coast for quite some time. The current conflict on the coast is between those influenced by Wahhabi reform which opposes the practice of *Maulid* celebration, on the grounds that only God is worthy of praise and that the prophet himself abjured giving praise to any human being; and the traditionalists who have carried out the celebrations of *maulid* for centuries, with the result that the ceremony has evolved and acquired local East African embellishments, which came to distinguish between the various classes or categories of *Maulid* particularly in Lamu. The anti-*Maulid* influence has recently found its way to Meru and now it is tearing the Majengo community into two rival groups.

⁴³ The relationship between the African (Meru) and Asian sections of the Muslim community has been perpetually turbulent and complex. However, it should be mentioned in passing that, from the point of view of most of the informants, the Asians have been emphatic in their ban on *Maulid* celebrations in Meru, but the effectiveness of this ban is another matter. Some of my informants confided in me that they are not against *maulid* but the ban is imposed on them by the leaders who have turned against the practice.

wanted to eradicate these old practices of the African Muslims but people still observe *matanga* and *arubaini* and their other practices.

But the real debate about the celebration of *Maulid* in Meru started some time in 1984 or thereabout. Most people felt that there was no reason why they should not carry on with this age-old practice. 'Who are these foreigners to come and tell us that we are wrong in our religious practices', the Muslims in Meru asked. At the height of the crisis, a meeting of all the sheikhs and other leaders in Meru was held in the Jamia mosque hall and debate on the issue. Those for *Maulid*, sought guidance in the Quran, 33:56 which says "God and His Angels Send blessings on the Prophet: O ye that believe! Send ye blessings on him, And salute him With all respect". They also argued that the prophet was praised when he entered Madinah.

Those against argued that times have changed and even the celebrations are held irregularly at different times and for different purposes, especially when different sponsors aim to outdo one another. Also during the celebrations these days, there is a disposition towards laxity in observing the segregation of sexes, for instance. These gatherings therefore are turning into social rather than religious occasions, and that is a form of *bid'a*.⁴⁴

The sheikh's statement is consistent with Launay's suggestion that many Muslims are aware of the existence of alternative practices of others which are inconsistent with theirs but also lay claim to Islam.

At the centre of these conceptions are questions about what it means to "be Muslim"- in other words, about what ideas and, especially, what practices are acceptable, desirable, or obligatory, or else objectionable, if not prohibited. Conceptions of Islam, as opposed to one another in specific places and times, revolve around disagreements over the status of specific practices, about the ways in which Muslims ought to act and the religious significance of different forms of action.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Sheikh Khalid, (interview 16th November 1991) to whom I am grateful for this information, is one of the leading anti-maulid sheikhs who participated in the debate.

⁴⁵ R. Launay, 1992:9-10.

Among the Muslims in Meru, controversy revolves around social and ritual issues as well as around doctrinal and theological questions. The opponents in Meru have questioned the religious value of *maulid*. Specific questions include the appropriateness of men and women mixing during celebrations and the performance of song and dance (*ngoma*). At issue also is the observance of certain rules of cleanliness (*tohara*) which are likely to be flouted in the merry-making spirit of the *maulid* celebrations, when all the participants are free to attend the mosque. The night meetings were also questioned from a moral point of view.⁴⁶

There was no consensus among the sheikhs over the celebration of *maulid* and the conflict remained unresolved. *Maulid* was considered by the sheikhs to be both joy (*farah*) and obligation (*faradh*) and since there should be no compulsion in religion (at least in principle) there were no means of enforcing conformity to the ban which had been imposed in 1982 by some influential Asian personalities and their supporters, hence the celebrations were resumed after a temporary stoppage. In October 1991, there was a fracas in the mosque in Majengo when the members of the anti-*maulid* group tried to halt the celebrations and forcefully ejected the celebrants from the mosque and locked it up. The police were called in to restore calm and the celebrations were stopped. This incident shocked the rest of the Muslim community. Thereafter the supporters of *maulid* boycotted the new magnificent mosque, built in 1986 and began to hold their prayers in the old mud-and-wood mosque which had been abandoned for the new one. The Majengo community split into two rival groups.⁴⁷ The supporters of *maulid* began to refer to their opponents as "*bid'a* people", because the latter

⁴⁶ Interview with Sheikh Mwinyi, Mjini, 27th November, 1991.

⁴⁷ I visited Majengo a week after the incident at the mosque and the details of what had happened were still part of the news. I observed that some neighbours were not on talking terms with others. One could almost feel the tension between them, people who had been friends chatting away in front of their houses during my visit in the previous week, now could not even say greetings to one another.

claimed that celebrating *maulid* is *bid'a*. Beckerleg notes that in Watamu on the coast, where Muslims are similarly divided over the issue of *maulid*:

An interesting form of competition has arisen between the two groups concerning the naming of the other. To most people the new group is known as *bid'a*. Members of either the *maulid* or new group may use this term, although some supporters of the new movement point out that the other *maulid* supporters are *bid'a*, while they the new group are *halali sunnah* or orthodox and permitted.⁴⁸

As the tension between the two groups in Meru continued to escalate, another debate on *maulid* was held at the Jamia mosque hall.⁴⁹ Again, the conflict was not resolved, but it was agreed that those who felt that *maulid* was religiously beneficial to them could go ahead and celebrate. Others should keep away. When asked for their opinion, many people, especially the older men expressed their disapproval of what they considered to be an externally instigated conflict to "divide the Muslims". There is a general disposition to treat the controversy generated by the *maulid* issue and the resultant religious divisions among the Meru Muslims as "the work of a few rich individuals who want to exercise control over the whole community".⁵⁰

After the Majengo mosque incident, another *maulid* celebration was organized and fairly well publicized, only this time it was held in Mukutano mosque. In the words of one of my informants, they (the pro-*maulid* Majengo residents):

⁴⁸ S. Beckerleg 1990:41.

⁴⁹ I was not allowed as a woman, to attend this meeting. However, after the meeting, Sheikh Mwinyi and Sheikh Ahmed, to whom I am grateful for this information, provided me as full an account of the proceedings as was possible. They told me that even in the meeting, the division between those against and those for *maulid* was evident, and therefore, it was not possible to come to a general consensus on the matter.

⁵⁰ A number of informants expressed such sentiments.

bowed out of the Majengo mosque due to our respect for Al-Hajji. We could have resisted when they pushed us out of the mosque, but because he is a government man, when the situation got out of hand and the police were called in, we knew the best thing then was to give up and leave the mosque. We knew that the mosque is ours and no individual has a right to lock it up against another. This time when *maulid* celebrations were planned to take place in another mosque, we were prepared for the worst. If they tried to disrupt the *maulid* celebration, we would resist and not bow out as we did in Majengo. This was our *maulid* celebration, not theirs and if they could not accept it, it was better for them to keep away from the celebrations rather than try to stop us.⁵¹

It can be said that this celebration was held partly as a protest against the Majengo incident. While in Watamu the *halali sunna* "represents an organized and concerted challenge to the power of the Sharif" and aims "to separate piety from Sharifhood"⁵² the supporters of *maulid* in Meru aim to challenge Asian domination. On the one hand therefore, support for *maulid* in Meru is seen as an opportunity to launch a concerted struggle against the Asians who are trying to take control of the community's religious affairs. Those who have joined the new group against *maulid* (*bid'a* people) are said to have been "bought by the Asians."⁵³ When I enquired the reason for this allegation, my informants argued that each of the six men who are now at the forefront in the anti-*maulid* campaign have turned only recently against *maulid*,

⁵¹ I attended this *maulid* and observed and felt the tension as the opponents were expected to disrupt it, but thanks to my informants (Interview with Rukia, Musa and Amina, Majengo, 9th November 1991) for filling in the details of what had happened previously.

⁵² S. Beckerleg, 1990:198-9.

⁵³ Interview with Mzee Ibrahim, Musa, Nyanya, and Halima, Majengo, 9th November 1991.

as if they have been converted to a different religion which requires them to abandon and even fight against the very practices that they themselves have hitherto supported.⁵⁴

On the other hand, the reformist stance in Meru typifies challenges that now face the body of traditions and customs which crystallized into the so-called Swahili-Islamic culture among many communities far from the coastal abode of the Swahili. The reformists inveigh against all forms of tradition, for instance, *matanga* and *arubaini*, practices which have held sway over the Muslim community for many years. Their opposition to these practices is consistent with their determination to bring about change, and (in the words of Sheikh Mwinyi, now turned reformer and head of the anti-*maulid* campaign) "make the people realize that these practices are not essentially Islamic, they belong to the days of ignorance".⁵⁵

Nevertheless, the majority of the people in Meru are in favour of *maulid* and there is a widespread feeling that there is no need to ban *maulid* celebrations. A large proportion of those against are young people who, as one of my informants put it, are easily swayed by external influence from outside the country. The older people are determined to hang on to what they consider as an important practice, handed down to them by their fathers. Sheikh Mwinyi, when asked to explain his change of mind, said that after reading widely, he realized that the local religious practices as taught by the pioneers needed to be re-examined and evaluated in the light of the available knowledge. He argued that when he was young (in the 1930s and 1940s), the teaching of the Quran aimed at inculcating belief without understanding the basic concepts and many other customs and ideas were introduced alongside, one of which is merry-making during the *maulid* celebrations. It must now be changed. He admitted to being

⁵⁴ Interview with Sheikh Ahmed, Mjini, 27th October 1991.

⁵⁵ Interview with Sheikh Mwinyi, Mjini, 27th November 1991.

influenced a great deal by his reading of the exegesis of Al-Suyuti and the works of the late Chief Qadhi, Sheikh Swaleh Farsy.⁵⁶ Not all the members of the anti-*maulid* group are as widely read. When some of them were asked why they oppose *maulid*, they said that they learnt about the issue of *bid'a* after viewing some videos brought in from the coast. Many of them could not offer a theological explanation as to why they consider celebrating *maulid* to be religiously wrong.

The Elders' Formal and Informal Authority

Since the Muslim settlements were established,⁵⁷ elders (*Wazee wa Mji*) have played an important role in the general running of the community's affairs. Some of the leading individuals in the second and third tier (discussed above) constitute an authoritative body, which functions at both the formal and informal levels. There are no defined criteria for eldership, except the unwritten rule among many African societies that wisdom comes with age. Members of this group are neither selected nor elected, they have no political power base. Age and experience are their greatest resource.

As I have said above, in this community everyone knows everyone else, and certain individuals are known to be good orators, persuasive in arguments, good in judgement, and tolerant. In other words, their leadership qualities are recognized and their credentials known to other people. Such individuals are consulted by their neighbours on a wide range

⁵⁶ See chapter 3 (p. 164) for the influence of the Swahili translation of the Quran on the local Muslims.

⁵⁷ See chapter 1 (pp. 30-33) for more information on the evolution of the "porters' lines" into the Swahili village; the development of the Indian Bazaar; the settlement of the ex-servicemen on the N.F.D. (later the Nubian village) in 1921; and the establishment of Majengo by the returning *mahaji* in or around 1926.

of issues and their opinions are taken seriously. These are the ones who gradually rise to the rank of eldership.

At the formal level, they represent and defend community interests at the local and central government administration whenever the need arises. For instance, during the colonial period, they organized collective payment of taxes in Majengo so as to avoid what they saw as police harassment and intrusion into their privacy. "This was an effort to protect the good name of our settlement," as my informant put it.⁵⁸ Again, when the Swahili village was demolished, it was the elders who presented the affected residents' claim for compensation and resettlement to the District Commissioner. Thus their role is recognized by the rest of the society - they are the unappointed community spokesmen.

At the informal level, they are not only concerned with the religious affairs of the community, but also with the maintenance of order, in other words, the enforcement of the fulfillment of what is expected of individuals as members of the Muslim community. The very nature of the Majengo social structure renders itself susceptible to discord among individuals at different levels: within the family, between spouses, among neighbours, and within the wider circle of residents.

On the one hand, the close proximity people have to each other and the high degree of communalism, are important factors in the creation and maintenance of the dense network of social ties that characterize the Majengo Muslim community. On the other, it is a form of social interaction where every member is a 'sanctioner', and at the same time under scrutiny, and this generates tension and life is fraught with human conflicts and situations that require solutions. Nothing escapes the attention of the residents. Commenting on the way information is passed on from one

⁵⁸ Interview with Mzee Ibrahim, Majengo, September 26th August 1991.

person to another and the social contexts in which it comes, Beckerleg concluded, "gossip in general, and backbiting...in particular are highly evolved arts amongst the Swahili".⁵⁹ This free flow of information (which I hesitate to dismiss as gossip) inevitably leads to occasional quarrels and fights, especially among women. In the event of such fights, it is the elders who intervene to restore harmony.

While in relation to other people in the town, Majengo residents could be considered to be poor, they assume the same life motif for survival and from a social point of view, every Majengo resident faces the same daily crisis in life. The majority of Muslims, having a relatively low educational attainment, tend to concentrate on petty trade and unskilled work. All their efforts are concentrated on subsistence, mainly for the satisfaction of immediate needs, and accordingly, their chances of acquiring wealth through accumulation of surplus are decreased. Therefore borrowing and lending money among friends and neighbours is a common practice. It may be argued that on the one hand such interdependence among individuals is not just an expression of solidarity, but also of religious affiliation, it helps to enhance the notion of community. On the other hand, sharing of limited resources among many individuals can in itself be a source of tension, as can be illustrated by the following case:

Musa borrowed some money from Ali but failed to honor his guarantee of payment. Ali sent one of the elders to fetch the money but Musa said that he was not in a position to pay. Afterwards, the two men fought over the debt. In the eyes of the community it was shameful that cousins should fight over a debt, nevertheless, their fight triggered a sort of chain reaction - it emerged that Musa's wife had been taking kerosine (used for lighting) on credit from Ali's wife. The two women also quarrelled and Musa's wife threatened to withhold the payment for the kerosine until her husband's money was paid back. The resultant tension made it difficult for Ali's wife to buy water from Nyanya, Musa's aunt who sells water (from a tap

⁵⁹ S. Beckerleg, 1990:197.

installed in her house with the help of her daughter living in Mombasa) to the other residents.

The news of the quarrel was known to everybody the next day and after two days, the story died down though the two women were not on talking terms. As tension continued to build up, Nyanya, being the eldest member of the family in question, saw it as her responsibility to restore harmony, so she approached Mzee Ibrahim to intervene and reconcile the cousins. A week later, after the congregational prayer, Ali and Musa were asked by Sheikh Yusuf to remain behind so as to discuss the matter with the sheikh and three other elders. After a long discussion, it was decided that the debtor should pay back what he owed; and the men should advise their wives to settle their differences accordingly. However, harmony was not restored immediately, but when I visited them two months later, I found that life was back to normal.⁶⁰

This case illustrates not only the degree of interdependence, but also the nature of the web of the relationships existing among the Majengo Muslims and the attendant tension. In such cases, the elders play an important role in maintaining social harmony among the residents.

'Giving *Mwiko* to Young Women'⁶¹

The regulation of the community religious affairs is the more important part of the elders' leadership role. Membership of the local sheikhs⁶² within the group legitimates the elders' authority over religious matters. The *Mualim* (teacher), sheikh and elders, therefore, are expected to set a standard for other Muslims. They are responsible for explaining the kind of behaviour that is expected of a Muslim.

⁶⁰ Interview with Rukia, Halima and Mzee Ibrahim, Majengo 26th August 1991.

⁶¹ *Mwiko* is a large wooden spoon or instrument resembling it, used to stir or mash food.

⁶² The high regard in which the 'learned' local sheikhs are held is highlighted above (p. 210)

A number of my older informants lamented that "the community's religious life has declined. It is not what it used to be twenty years ago."⁶³ Thus they express their disillusionment with the deteriorating religious commitment of youth.⁶⁴ The older women talk nostalgically of the quality of education that they were given by their tutors or *somo* to prepare them for adult life, and ^{lament that} this education is no longer given to Muslim girls.⁶⁵ The elders' concern to uphold the religious morality of the Muslim community is evident in the following episode which was described to me by some of the participants:

Recently, it was decided that young women should take over from their mothers the function of preparing meals for such religious festivals as Id-ul Fitr and *maulid* celebrations. The idea came from the older women in Majengo and it won an enthusiastic support from the elders, who suggested that for the handing-over ceremony, all the young women participants should wear a 'uniform' 'a religious dress'. The young women decided that the 'uniform' (a grey long gown) be ordered from one dealer because that way, it was cheaper and easier to ensure that all the gowns were uniform.

⁶³ Nyanya, Mwanaisha and Mzee Ibrahim (Majengo pioneers) were unanimous in their view that there is a tendency among the youth to become less religious as they get enmeshed in the town's social and economic activities (interview, Majengo, 26th August 1991).

⁶⁴ On several occasions when I attended the Friday prayers at the Jamia Mosque in Meru town, I observed a low attendance of the youth. In one of the women's prayer hall (I was informed that the Asian women pray in a different hall) for instance, there were approximately thirty to forty women on each occasion and the majority were elderly women.

⁶⁵ Mwanaidi, (interview, Mjini, 20th November 1991) says that "on attainment of puberty, a young girl would be taken to live with her tutor or *somo*, who taught her how to be a Muslim woman". Of this form of education among the Swahili of Mombasa, Mirza and Strobel (1989:71) say that "girls were instructed individually by a *somo* on matters of menstruation and sexuality". But now things have changed and this form of instruction has been replaced by formal schooling, which according to Mwanaidi, who still values the education she got from her *somo* when she was a young girl, "does not inculcate religious ideals or even the notion of socially acceptable behaviour".

The members of the community contributed money to buy rice and other food-stuff, and of course Al-Hajji sponsored and publicized the event. On the appointed day, the older women met at the mosque grounds in Majengo and prepared the food. In the afternoon, the elders and other residents congregated there to witness our mothers symbolically hand over the task of cooking to us by giving the *mwiko* to us. When every one was seated (men on one side and women on the other) Mama Ali called all the young women who were dressed in their immaculate new gowns to one corner and ceremoniously handed the *mwiko* to us and said that, henceforth it would be our responsibility to cook during religious festivals and weddings. Then we served the food. Afterwards, the sheikh stood to address the gathering. He spoke at length on the problems afflicting the Muslim community; the importance of religiously appropriate behaviour and exhorted us, especially the young generation, to observe regular prayer and mosque attendance. He expressed his appreciation of our effort and urged us to keep up the spirit.

After the ceremony, this gown would also be used as a 'uniform' by all those who were given the *mwiko*. The elders were delighted that we bought this uniform. We chose grey instead of the customary black gown (*buibui*) because the black *buibui* is used by the older women and we felt that a bright colour would be more suitable for younger women. And also wanted to distinguish ourselves from others. After all, if we chose to wear black *buibui*, what difference would it have made and every Muslim woman is expected to wear *buibui* outdoors? This was supposed to be a turning point for the young women in Majengo.⁶⁶

Unfortunately, the spirit of the *mwiko* ceremony did not hold for too long and there was not much change, even though some of the young women were seen occasionally wearing their grey gowns.

The Muslim community in Mjini and Majengo has not been static, but has experienced social change as has the rest of the country. The Swahili-Islamic cultural values that were inculcated in the 1930s and 1940s by the personal tutors (*somo*) for young girls during the puberty stage, for instance, have either changed, or are no longer meaningful to the society and the *somo* institution is now obsolete. For instance, Mwanaidi says that

⁶⁶ Interview with Rabiya and Rukia, Majengo, 8th November 1991.

as a young girl, she was taught the wifely duties: how to take care of her husband, to keep the house clean, and to entertain guests. This kind of education presupposed that every girl was going to find a husband and a house to keep, which is no longer the case.

For Mwanaidi and other older people, this change is understood in terms of its impact on the religious values of the community. They attribute the common phenomenon of single mothers (which was one of the points given prominence by the sheikh during this ceremony) to the current social changes which have taken away the traditional methods of preparing young girls for adult life and inculcating those values that emphasize the sanctity of marriage and family life. But this is only a part of the reason, the real reason may be economic. Let us examine two such cases:

Leila is a single mother of three. She had the following to say about herself: I was put into the family when I was in form two, and consequently I dropped out of school even before completing the second year of secondary education. My life was wrecked and my parents were furious with me. They said that I had brought shame to the family, and for a long time, our relationship was strained, though I was still living with them. Gradually they came to terms with the situation and our relationship began to improve.

Later on, I met a nice young man who was ready to marry me. Though he was not a Muslim, I did not mind, but my parents were again incensed by the affair and forbade me to marry him. Nevertheless, we lived together for about three years during which I got a second child by him. It did not work, so we broke up. The father of my third child, as you see I have three children, lives on the other side, not too far from here. This was a brief affair because I knew his father would not allow him to marry me. For the last few years, I have lived alone and looked after my children on my own. Without a regular source of income, it is hard for me to support them. It would be impossible for me to afford rent, for instance, but I am lucky to be living in this house which belongs to my father. Those people who complain about brewing illicit liquor are those with other sources of income. We also know that it is not good, but it is our means of survival.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Interview with Leila, Majengo, 8th September 1991.

The second case is that of Mona:

She, unlike Leila, was married, had five children and lived with her husband in a different town for ten years. Unfortunately death struck suddenly and she was widowed in her late twenties. Without a job or any other means of livelihood, it was difficult for her to support herself and her children. She returned to her grandmother in Meru. Again, without any source of income of her own, her grandmother's meager resources were stretched to the limits, and the situation was almost getting out of hand when she found a small job in one of the eating houses in the town.⁶⁸

The background circumstances of these two cases differ in several respects, but in the long run, the two women find themselves faced with the same situation - penury and community disapproval. They are judged by the same criteria of single motherhood by members of the community. For instance, one *madrassa* teacher lamented that many of his pupils are brought up by their grandparents. Their single mothers are faced with economic hardships, with the result that they are heavily dependent on the brewing of an illicit type of local gin, which is heavily consumed in spite the religious prohibition on the consumption of alcohol and other forms of intoxicants. The *madrassa* teacher felt that "this dependency on illicit brewing would surely diminish should considerable wage earning opportunities present themselves".⁶⁹ In their absence therefore, women (for it is they who do the brewing and the men the drinking) continue to brew the illicit liquor, though its production and consumption is seen as a deep-

⁶⁸ Interview with Mona and Nyanya, Meru town 5th September 1991.

⁶⁹ A teacher who has been teaching at the *madrassa* in the Meru Muslim school for 9 years, explained that during term time, children are given religious instruction after school and during weekends. During school holidays, i.e. April, August and December, they attend the religious lessons all day. Attendance is irregular and the teacher blamed this irregularity on the instability of the families of some of those children who are left in the care of their grandparents.

rooted problem for which everyone in the community is continually apologizing.⁷⁰

It is also important to note here that, in spite of the fact that every member of this society is under scrutiny and that gossip and public opinion serve as means of enforcing conformity to the local standards of morality, it is the women's conformity that is at issue. Single women are on the whole disreputable, hence the women two are judged by the same set of criteria. In Africa men generally "agree that women's morality must be controlled".⁷¹ The *mwiko* ceremony described above, could well illustrate this point: while it is the young people in general who are showing signs of relative laxity, the moral lesson is directed specifically at women. Thus the moral lesson has gender overtones.

This may explain why the young women were the target of this moralizing ceremony. Under these circumstances, there is a constant effort by the elders to reconstruct the past Muslim community, where the notion of individual piety and religious community consciousness are the norm. Elders are engaged in a perpetual pursuit urging the younger generation to hang on to age-old religious ideals.

⁷⁰ On many occasions and religious gatherings, sheikhs and other leaders take the opportunity to condemn the brewing and consumption of liquor, reiterating that it is forbidden for Muslims, for instance, during a fairly well attended Friday sermon at the Jamia Mosque (2nd August 1991), the Imam condemned the practice. Also when I attended the women's group meeting held in one of the member's house in the town (3rd August 1991), I observed that it was on the agenda - one of the aims of this women's group is to find alternative means of livelihood for those dependent on illicit brewing.

⁷¹ C. Obbo, 1980:15.

Friendship Patterns

Religious affiliation serves as a means of expressing network solidarity within Majengo and Mjini; nevertheless, Muslims are also aware of themselves as a social group with common interests. As can be seen from such welfare associations as the Majengo Muslim Women's Group, they are organized on this basis. When the group was formed initially, there was a suggestion that the name be changed from 'Majengo Muslim Women's Group' by omitting the word 'Muslim', which might exclude other potential members. This suggestion was rejected on the grounds that this was a group for Muslim women and not just any women. It was argued that if the word 'Muslim' was omitted, the identity of the members of the group would be lost and this group would not be different from any other women's group in the area. However, the name was not changed and the tendency is to discourage close association with non-Muslims. For instance there are members in the women's group who feel that it is wrong to include two non-Muslim Majengo residents because they consider it religiously inappropriate to share money or other items that might be part of donations (*sadaq*). Occasionally, they receive donations from Muslim organizations and they feel that such "donations are made in the name of Allah and therefore should be used for a religious cause - improve the lot of Muslims".⁷² When I enquired why this is the case, my informants explained that close association with non-Muslims may jeopardize one's faith in various ways:

If you walk with people who do not understand or respect your religious obligations, they are likely to exercise their influence on you and lead you astray. For instance, if you visit their houses, you might eat food that is not *halal*. If you are in their company during the holy month of Ramadhan, you might find it difficult to observe the fast. As a Muslim, you must know where you stand in relation to other people, and let them know that your religion forbids you to do certain

⁷² Interview with Mwajuma (women's group leader) Meru town, 3rd August 1991.

things that other people are free to do. That is the difference between you and them.⁷³

It is therefore evident that close ties between Muslims and non-Muslims are frowned upon. We can illustrate this further by examining the basis on which friendships are encouraged and formed within the Muslim community.

To determine the pattern of friendships, I asked 43 (24 women and 19 men) randomly chosen informants who their friends were and whether they had any non-Muslim friends. To be able to identify the important factors that determine the choice of friends, I devised categories of possible friends: Muslim neighbours; non-Muslim neighbours; and non-Muslims outside Meru town. The response from my informants revealed an interesting pattern of social alignment: thirteen (68%) of the men interviewed said that they have friends among fellow Muslims regardless of whether they are within or without Majengo; and six (31%) have non-Muslim friends, who are neighbours or clients. One of the six men is a sheikh, who, by virtue of his position and relatively high social standing, has a higher degree of leadership, with the result that his level of interaction with different people is accordingly higher than that of an ordinary Majengo resident. He is also renowned for his ability to treat various kinds of illness, with the result that he has a large number of clients, both Muslim and others.

Another, a recent convert, maintained strong ties with his non-Muslim friends and the third, a young semi-skilled motor mechanic whose clients were obviously non-Muslim. Twenty (83%) of the women said that their friends were fellow Muslims, while 4 (16%) of them had friends among non-Muslim neighbours. Of these two who have non-Muslim friends, one of

⁷³ Interview with Halima, Majengo, 5th September 1991.

whom works in an office and according to her, her colleagues are good friends:

these are educated people and they are least concerned with the issue of whether or not one is a Muslim. After all, *dini* should not be an issue with other people, it is a personal matter. It is between me and God.⁷⁴

The third woman is also young and a recent convert, who has been coopted into the community as a result of her marriage to a Muslim man. She told me that she has several non-Muslim friends:

because it is inappropriate to sever ties with your old friends, and also relatives just because one has become a Muslim. *Dini* has nothing to do with friendship. In fact it is wrong to hurt your good friends because their beliefs are different from yours.⁷⁵

Nyanya, an older woman said that all her friends are Muslim

because a friend is a person that you trust, one that you can rely upon, and one with whom you can share your problems. Such a person should be one that has the same aspirations as you, one that understands your way of life. A non-Muslim is an outsider to the community, she does not know the rules that you follow. How can you share your life with such a person? What will she contribute to your life? Such a friendship will only bring misunderstanding, and even shame to the believer for having one foot here and the other one there. You know the saying that 'what is good for you could be poison for another person - this is even more so for two people who believe in completely different ways of life.'⁷⁶

On the whole, therefore Muslims prefer to make friends with fellow Muslims. However these three responses suggest a difference of opinion

⁷⁴ Interview with Saada, Meru town, 2nd August 1991.

⁷⁵ Interview with Rabiya, Majengo, 2nd August 1991.

⁷⁶ Interview with Nyanya, Majengo, 26th August 1992.

between the young and the old - the first two women are young, indeed two generations younger since Nyanya is their grandmother. Older men and women tend to stick with fellow Muslims, while younger people are more inclined to make friends with non-Muslims, and thus their friendship pattern is not confined within religious boundaries, as can be seen from the cases of the young mechanic and the office clerk presented above. Saada feels that her Muslim identity should not determine her relationship with colleagues at work. In contrast, Nyanya cannot accept to share her secrets with a non-Muslim and she thinks that such a friendship is not beneficial to her. Indeed she criticized such opinion as expressed by Saada and Rabiya; and went on to describe an incident when some youths, due to bad company, fought at a social club and ended up in the police cells, "bringing shame to the whole community".

Another significant observation is that men are more open to friendship with non-Muslims, there being more men with non-Muslim friends than women. The explanation for this may be found in the relatively high degree of public exposure to which men are subject in their places of work. Yet there is an implicit contradiction in that they object to their wives having non-Muslim friends. I came to know of a man who threatened to beat his wife if she continued to visit her non-Muslim friends living in a different part of the town. He complained that "she has started to behave like them - she is seen in their company without covering her head due to their influence".⁷⁷ When I pointed out to this informant that some men have some non-Muslim friends, he said that women are more susceptible to external influence than men, and therefore, they should avoid alluring friends. The validity of this statement is not significant for our discussion; the point to note is that close association with non-Muslims is discouraged.

⁷⁷ Interview with Alijabu, Meru town, 16th November 1991.

The main factor underpinning the friendship patterns is religious affiliation. In Ujiji, Hino found that people sharing one courtyard, (*ua moja*) constitute a primary neighbourhood group; though "they are not aware of themselves as a group who co-use *ua* (*ua moja*) or one courtyard".⁷⁸ In Meru, neighbourhood is of secondary importance. This, however, is not to negate the significant role of proximity in the life of Majengo Muslims. Spatial proximity facilitates close relationships among neighbours in Majengo. One way in which social interaction is created and sustained is through the exchange of regular visits between neighbours, who may at the same time be friends, to chat and discuss personal or community affairs. To the rest of the people, "the Swahili habit of sitting lazily and gossiping around the *mtaa*" is detestable.

But to the members of the community, it has its social functions. As Swartz observed among the Swahili of Mombasa, each individual

is part of a pool... whose members choose one another for relationships of varying intensity, frequency and association, and duration. Some of these relationships are distant and others involve regular mutual assistance and exchange of some kinds of confidential information, and strong emotional bonds.⁷⁹

Though the Swahili community in Mombasa is profoundly different from the 'Swahili' of Meru the social "pool" is similarly vital for the latter. In a sense, the social pool serves to reinforce social control in this community, in which it is fairly difficult to keep anything concealed from the attention of discerning neighbours and friends. It is equally difficult to enter a social circle outside the Muslim community and at the same time retain one's place in that community, especially when one is a woman.

⁷⁸ S. Hino, 1980:13.

⁷⁹ M. J. Swartz, 1991:7.

Raja's case could well illustrate the outcome of an individual's failure to conform:

Raja, a young single Muslim woman works as a junior employee in an office in Meru town. She is a daughter of a respectable Muslim elder. At one time, she moved from her parents' house and sought accommodation in one of the town's residential areas. No sooner had she settled in her new house than it was rumoured that she had left her parent's house so as to "lead a free social life of night dances and parties like the other town women". Whether or not she went to these social events, which are unacceptable to the members of the Muslim community, I was not able to ascertain. But throughout the period of my fieldwork she lived independently in her own house, irrespective of other people's disapproval.⁸⁰

The fact that Raja did not care for public opinion was bad enough. Worse still, her move to extricate herself from the social pool in the Muslim community, for that is what it amounted to, constituted a departure from the norm. Raja's case was particularly thorny because of her father's high social standing. Three of my informants confided in me that Raja's "family was gradually losing respect because of the children's waywardness". On status and culture, Swartz says that:

It is through statuses that it is established which cultural elements are associated with which individuals according to the categories they are understood to occupy in different circumstances.⁸¹

This is true in Raja's case. Halima, one of the first-generation Majengo residents, commented that:

⁸⁰ I met Raja on several occasions (3rd August, 7th September and 23rd October 1991) and discussed with her the general attitude of the older people towards the sense of independence that a young woman in her position would cherish. She told me that even her parents found it difficult to accept her decision to move out of home and lead an independent life on her own in one of the town's residential estates.

⁸¹ M. J. Swartz, 1991:75.

if she (Raja) were not the daughter of a respectable Muslim elder, the gravity of her behaviour would have been much less. It is sad that many people look up to the family, yet this is what the children are doing!⁸²

Local perceptions of Islam provide models of what is positively evaluated behaviour for individuals. In other words, an individual's behaviour is evaluated in terms of whether it conforms to what is expected of a Muslim. To quote Swartz on Mombasa yet again, "every member of the community is a 'sanctioner'".⁸³ Failure to conform to the general expectations of the Muslim community, therefore, constitutes departure from what is considered proper. It is in this light that public opinion serves as a means of enforcing conformity to socially acceptable modes of behaviour, though a growing trend of failure to control the youth by parents and the older members of the community is apparent.

These days the situation has changed and a majority of the single women living in the town have to fend for themselves and their children. But change is not accepted easily by society, so when young women like Raja cherish an independent life, rather than seek to fulfil the wifely duties (as did her mother 40 years ago) her behaviour is frowned upon by the community. To the majority of the older generation Muslims, these social-economic changes are fitted in the traditional understanding of religious morality, which, for instance, demands that women be excluded from public life. Yet exclusion of women from public life is not consonant with the demands of modern life. Therefore, as Obbo (1980:15) suggests weight of moral pressure, which in this case derives from religious sources,

is exerted on women in order to reverse or hinder possible changes in the power and authority relationships between men and women.

⁸² Interview with Halima, Majengo, 9th November 1991.

⁸³ M. J. Swartz, 1991:17.

For example, male concern over women's dress and morality directly hinders women's effective entrance into and performance in the political arena.⁸⁴

It is against such pressure that women like Raja have to stand. Perhaps, it is in the same spirit that the women's groups are organized. In an attempt to improve their lot, the women have formed self-help groups and associations. The aim of Majengo Muslim Jua Kali Women Group, for instance, is to "assist each other so that those who involve themselves in brewing of illicit liquor can find an alternative source of help".⁸⁵ They contribute money for one person each week until all the members have received a lump-sum amount which they spend on their immediate needs. They also contribute money for specific projects, for instance, they buy the basic household items for those who need them; they have a project to buy building materials for some of the members living in the old mud-walled houses; they do embroidery work and make pillows for sale in order to raise money for their self-help projects.

Men hardly acknowledge the women's efforts. As I have shown above, they are excluded from religious leadership issues, for instance the debate on *maulid* and the issue of *bid'a*. Nevertheless, it is important to note that they have an effective role to play in spite of their 'official' exclusion, from issues of religious leadership. They are able to play an effective role in the debate in a different way than their husbands and brothers, perhaps from a vantage point - they are at the 'grass-root level', where there is intense social contact.

⁸⁴ C. Obbo, 1980:15.

⁸⁵ Interview with the members of the group, 3rd August 1991. The group's registration certificate shows that it was registered with the Registrar of Societies in 1984 and the attendance register has 27 names of members.

Conclusion

What then holds the Muslim community together in spite of all these cleavages? The common Muslim community identity, reinforced by the concept of geographical place, (*mji*), and the social setup of Majengo, upon which the intricate web of social ties depends, makes Majengo the peculiar cultural island that it is. The values of *dini* have ensured that the Muslims remain identifiable as a group, in other words, Islam provides the link that runs through the various strands of the Majengo social matrix. However, as Beckerleg has warned, being beguiled into presenting order in the Swahili society, on which the Majengo Muslim community is modelled, is "to impose order little apparent in social life".⁸⁶ Therefore, what I have done in this chapter is to present the Majengo society with its contradictions as they appear to an outside observer. The Muslims are aware of themselves as a religious community, and they are also aware of the external forces that pose a threat to the community. Thus the elders are concerned to safeguard the religious morality of the youth who are more susceptible to changes that are taking place in the wider society.

⁸⁶ S. Beckerleg, 1990:33.

CHAPTER SIX

***TABLIGH* AND ITS AFTERMATH: THE ‘*INSHALLAH* MUSLIMS’**

Introduction

Islam in Meru is not restricted to the Muslim enclaves of Majengo and Mjini, within Meru municipality. There are pockets of Muslims scattered in the trade centres and various other places throughout the district. Igembe division, in the northern part of the district, has the largest number of Muslims outside Majengo and Mjini. Therefore, to complete the picture of Islam in Meru, in this chapter I will identify the forces that have been at work in these places and examine their influence on the local constructions of Islam. The main focus will be on the activities of the *Tabligh*, the proliferation of mosques in Igembe division and surrounds. I will also comment on the trends of conversion to Islam in this region.

Since the beginning of the 1980s, one observes a slow but steady growth of Muslim influence, particularly in the rural areas, evidenced by a significant rise in the number of mosques. In order to explain this phenomenon, I will first describe the pattern of Muslim practices and observance of religious obligations that has hitherto obtained in Igembe. Then I will examine the extent and nature of the influence of *Tabligh* on Muslims in this area.

The situation of individual Muslims cannot be seen in abstract isolation from the wider social network in the rural areas. This leads to the pertinent question of Muslim identity: that is, on the one hand, the question of how the Muslims define themselves in relation and opposition to others; and how, on the other, they are seen and defined by others. An analysis of the apparent paradox of antagonistic identities, leads the discussion to the underlying concept of the struggle between *Dini* and *ushenzi*, as it is seen

in the local constructions of Islam. Here I present the rural situation with its paradoxes and contradictions as I see them expressed in the study cases.

Tabligh

In this section I will examine the role of the *Tabligh* movement, which has been active in the rural areas. First I will briefly put it in its context of a world revivalist movement¹ by stating its origins and its fundamental principles and features. Then I will examine its manifestations in Meru and demonstrate that, as a result of *Tabligh* activities, what appears to have been an interminable stagnation of Islam in Meru has recently been transformed into a slow but steadily growing force.

Al Mawrid Arabic-English dictionary defines the term *Tabligh* as "to be informed, told, notified; to be reported; to be conveyed, communicated, transmitted..."² *Tabligh Jamaat*, one of the "great Islamic movements generated in twentieth century South Asia",³ has its origins in the Deoband school.⁴ Nielson . sees it as "the active pietism of the Deoband movement".⁵ *Tabligh Jamaat* was founded in India by Maulana Ilyas

¹ There is a large amount of material on the Islamic resurgence - Hodgkin in her essay on "Islamism and Islamic Research in Africa", *Islam et Societes au Sud du Sahara*, n.4, 1992, says that "the study of the Islamic revival has, in the last decade, become as much of a growth industry as the revival itself" (p.73).

² R. Baalbaki, *Al-Mawrd*, A Modern Arabic-English Dictionary, (second edition). Dar El-Ilm Lilmalayin, Beirut, 1990.

³ F. Robinson, 1988:17.

⁴ The Deoband movement came into existence in India during the second half of the 19th century. The movement takes its name from the site of the madrasa (now a large Muslim university) founded in 1867 by two ulama, Muhamad Qasim Nanautwi (1833-1877) and Rashid Ahmed Gangohi (1833-1905) at the then small town of Deoband in Uttar Pradesh, India. For more information on the movement, see B. Metcalf 1982 *passim*.

⁵ J. Nielsen, 1992:133.

(1885-1944) in the late 1920s and spread to many parts of the world. He defined the fundamental principles, through which the movement seeks to reform and spread the Muslim faith. Haq aptly sums them up thus:

To a Muslim, faith and life based on faith means holding firmly to kalimah and prayer, regularly observing 'zikir', learning its virtues and excellences, fulfilling duties and obligations, respecting the rights of fellow-Muslims, seeking the pleasure of God, following in the footsteps of the Prophet and going from door to door, city to city and country to country for the sake of faith.⁶

As a revivalist movement, *Tabligh Jamaat* relies on Sufi practices. As Haq observes, its founder, himself a sufi,

inaugurated a religious movement which aimed at reviving spiritual devotion by emphasizing sufi practices which he adopted for his work with certain changes.⁷

The *Tabligh* influence that is prevalent in Meru originates in Pakistan, but before I examine the local embellishment to the movement's fundamental principles, it is necessary first to provide some background information on *Tabligh* in Kenya.

Stipulated Aims and Objectives at the National Level

The influence of *Tabligh* began to infiltrate the country, largely from Pakistan, in the mid 1970s, but it was not until the beginning of the 1980s that its effects began to be felt.

⁶ A. M. Haq, 1972:145.

⁷ Ibid., p.62.

In the words of a leading Muslim,

The year 1980 was the year of many dreams, many hopes and expectations, increased struggles, enhanced determination, self-realization and increased confidence for the Muslim community in the country. For the dreams and hopes the sources was (*sic*) the much needed co-operation and encouraging assistance we received both from within and abroad; for increased struggles and enhanced determination the driving force was as a result of a new realization of the magnitude of the task the Council (Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims) was expected to accomplish...keeping in view the changing times the consequent (*sic*) changing needs; and the self realization and consequent (*sic*) added confidence was sparked by the 'new learning' from research Muslim scholars, assemblies and congregations, and above all the world wide expectations of the new era of 15th century A.H.⁸

While this is a testimony to the fact that the year 1980 was significant for the Kenyan Muslims in general; it is also an apt statement of the events and forces underlying the emergence of *Tabligh* throughout the country. What is significant for our purpose is that this year was a turning point; and that there was an intensification of the struggle, an enhanced determination coupled with self-realization on the part of the Muslims. More importantly, these forces are clearly linked with others abroad or from outside the country. This is the beginning of *Tabligh* which spread to Meru, among other places.⁹

⁸ This statement was made by a senior member in his annual report to the Council. The Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims was formed in 1972 to co-ordinate the activities of the Muslims throughout the country. The Council sees itself as "the parent organization that embraces all shades of Muslim views and opinions", see Council Memorandum to the President of Kenya, Copies of these documents were available in the files kept by the provincial representatives to the Council.

⁹ The available information shows that the "Directorate of *Tabligh*" was established as a department of the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims. It was stipulated that the members of the *Tabligh* committee "must be able to act independently in guiding the *Tabligh* activities within the framework of the council's policy". These activities include: looking after "the affairs of the mosques"; "the role and development of religious institutions"; "religious consciousness of youth". The programs for the Directorate of *Tabligh* are outlined in a document

When the *Tabligh* committee was formed, its members "recognized the gigantic nature of its duties and largeness of the job" and "saw the diverseness of its activities".¹⁰ The aims and objectives of the *Tabligh* committee were defined in terms of service to "the Muslim Community". Whether the whole spectrum of Kenyan Muslims can be regarded as a 'community', is another matter. However, the committee in the main was initially concerned to establish, among other things:

How is it (Muslim community) dispersed over Kenya?...What are their religious needs? What character is it developing; how much is Islam cunducine (*sic*) to the model of its life? how much is it affected by other than Islamic culture... What role it has as a community of Muslims - what are its achievements? Who are the mubashiriyn and khutabaa?... How much Islamic is the youth/are the children. How much chance to grow as Muslims; What learning facilities there exists... What to do to make the future community cohesively and progressively Islamic...¹¹

Initially, it was proposed to organize the *Tabligh* Committee at the national level into "compartments or cells". But, whether the cells were formed or not, it is difficult to tell. It is also difficult to tell from the accounts of the informants, which of the *Tabligh* activities that one sees in Meru are linked with the committee and which are carried out by independent *Tabligh* groups that are now active in the area. There is an overlap in their activities because, after the Directorate of *Tabligh* was formed at the national level, the responsibility of the organization of *Tabligh* activities in a given area, fell to the local Muslim leaders.

titled "The Background of Development".

¹⁰ See "The Background of Development" document, p.2.

¹¹ Ibid., p.2.

The first step in the organization of *Tabligh* was the appointment of regional leaders known as *ma-Amiri* and the formation of groups known as *vikundi vya Fisabili-Llahi*, which literally means 'groups in the path of God', to work in each area. The function of these groups under the leadership of these *ma-Amiri*, in the words of the national leader of *Tabligh*, is to:

make efforts to awaken the people. These leaders visit every town in the country on a mission known as *itikafu* in order to popularize *Tabligh*. Their collective effort is known as *ijt mai*, that is the meetings for religious affairs. And because these activities are closely interlaced with preaching and proclaiming our faith, the department of *tabligh* has been working in conjunction with these *ma-Amiri*.¹²

The aim of the national committee was to reach all the Muslims in the country; for the achievement of which task, a group of regional leaders (*ma-Amiri*, Sing. *Amiri*) and other Muslim representatives from all over Kenya (two bus loads) travelled to Moshi in Tanzania, where the movement was better established, to attend a big religious meeting early in 1980. This was the beginning of the Tanzanian connection and the influence of one Darwesh, an Asian of Pakistan origin who is credited with introducing and laying the foundations of *Tabligh* work in Meru. On their return, a large *Tabligh* meeting was organized in Kisumu in Western Kenya, which it is claimed, was attended by five thousand delegates from all over the country.¹³ After this, which we might call the inaugural meeting or *ijtmai* as my informants prefer to call it, other meetings were organized in many other towns wherever Muslims are found.

¹² See the Council Chairman's Report, 14th April, 1981.

¹³ Interview with Sheikh Mwinyi, Mjini, 18th November 1991.

It was soon realized that for it to succeed, *Tabligh* has to be directed at a targeted rural population:

If we (leaders) ignore the rural areas, it will be self-defeating for there are many Muslims there without leadership, still receiving the traditional education. If you look at the Christians, you find that they rush to the rural areas because that is where there is need and thus they find followers: while we concentrate our efforts only in the big towns. Second, they direct their attention at the youth because it is easier to teach them and once they grasp the teachings, it is not easy to abandon them. Also they (Christians) have initiated many projects in the rural areas to help the youth to become self-reliant; while we neglect these areas and concentrate our efforts only in the towns.¹⁴

This, may explain why *Tabligh* activity has been relatively less in the Muslim enclaves within the Meru municipality. The main target of *Tabligh* being the rural Muslims without leadership, its activities should be devoted to, and its energies spent on, the areas where there are good prospects of winning more converts. Hence the recent apparent increase in Muslim activities in the rural areas can be attributed mainly to *Tabligh*.

Diffusion of Tabligh: The Inaugural Ijtmal - Meru

Soon after the Kisumu *ijtmal*, Sheikh Mwinyi, of whom previous mention has been made and now the newly appointed senior *Amiri*, together with other local leaders, organized the first *ijtmal* in Meru from 3rd to 5th of October 1980. According to my informants, it was a big success.

In his annual report, the provincial Muslim leader observed that:

The seminar held in Meru was enlightening because many people have since tried to join *Tabligh* and attend the mosques in order to worship...boys and girls also are beginning to attend the mosque...¹⁵

¹⁴ "Ripoti ya Naibu wa Mwenyekiti, Mkoa Mashariki", 1981.

¹⁵ See "Ripoti ya Naibu wa Mwenyekiti, Mkoa wa Mashariki", 1981.

This marks the beginning of *Tabligh* in Meru. During this meeting, the guest speakers, among them Darwesh, espoused the merits of *Tabligh*.¹⁶ During the sermons the speakers urged the believers to stand up for their Muslim identity and shun *ushenzi*. The leading *Amir* in Meru (appointed by Darwesh and later sent to Pakistan for six months' training) set forth the parameters of the work of *Tabligh*. He defined *Tabligh* as a "means to spread" Islam. Muslims are commanded to forbid evil and enhance goodness, for which task, he suggested, individuals should volunteer and form some sort of vigilante groups¹⁷ to revive and spread Islam in Meru.

Further, he elucidated the fundamentals of *Tabligh*, namely: trust in God; prayer; performance of *Dhikir*, using a rosary (*tasbih*) three times over; showing kindness and respect to all; purity of faith; and finally, to strive in the path of God. By backing the need for the formation of *Tabligh* groups with the relevant verses, and couching it in obligatory terms, the *Amir* was able to appeal to the religious conscience of a good number of potential individuals, with the result that the first two main *Tabligh* groups were formed within a relatively short time after this meeting. They began their work under this *Amiri*.

The Procedure of a *Tabligh* Mission

Musa, a leader of a fairly active *Tabligh* group¹⁸ explained in great detail the *modus-operandi* of a *Tabligh* mission: a group of 15 to 20 persons goes out on a preaching mission to a given area. The choice of the area to

¹⁶ Interview with Sheikh Mwinyi, Mjini, 18th November, 1991.

¹⁷ It is interesting to note that Al-Maghili mentioned something of this kind for Timbuktu in his answers to Askia's questions, written in AD.1500, see J. O. Hunwick, 1985:94.

¹⁸ Musa is a local *Tabligh* leader/teacher, *Amiri*. He was appointed an *Amiri* after completing his training in the organization of *Tabligh* in Mombasa. To him I am grateful for the information on the procedure of a *tabligh* mission.

be visited is determined by various criteria, principal of which is the "need to awaken the believers" in that area, if their Muslim identity is considered to be threatened by external forces. In places where Muslims are few and far between, a visit by a *Tabligh* group gives a boost to their faith. Such visits are organized for this purpose, but with the underlying motive of making converts, whenever the prospects appear promising. For instance, a leading member of the Mjini *Tabligh* Women Group told me that on one

successful *Tabligh* mission to Igembe area, 20 women were won to Islam, though the initial aim of the mission was to visit a group of five women who had recently been converted.¹⁹

When I enquired why her group targeted the women in that area, she gave two reasons: first, as a women's group, they could not preach to men, so their attention was directed to other women. Second, in her opinion, some of the women converted during the 1984 famine had, due to lack of such encouragement and support as they would get if they were part of a Muslim community in a Majengo, become retrogressive. Some of them had virtually lost their Muslim identity, and she as a *Tabligh* leader, felt the need to bring them back to the fold.²⁰

¹⁹ Interview with Maruwa, an active *Tabligh* member and leader of a *Tabligh* women's group based in Meru town. She explained that her group has been engaged in *Tabligh* activities in Kiengu area, nearly 30 miles away from Meru town, as a result of which a number of women had been won over to Islam.

²⁰ Interview with Maruwa, Mjini, 26th November 1991. As will be shown below, many people particularly women in Kiengu and its environs, were converted during the 1984 famine. This phenomenon of gender differentiation in this particular incident of conversion to Islam may be explained by the fact that traditionally, it is women who feed the family, and therefore, should a famine occur, they are the ones to go in search of food. So during this particular famine, the food that was distributed in the area had been donated by a Muslim community through the local prominent Asian Muslim leader. Understandably, it was distributed at the mosque and so the women had to go there. In the process, a good number were converted. But since many of them did not even learn much about *dini*, it was difficult for them to sustain their new identity. This explains why the *Tabligh* groups target this area - even those from Pakistan are directed here by the leading *Amiri* in Meru town.

The *ma-Amiri* (plural) that I interviewed said that a *Tabligh* mission begins with the identification of the place to be visited, after which a group of 15 to 20 persons prepares to go out to "seek Muslims". The leader of the group is an *Amiri*, one supposedly acquainted with the aims and objectives of *Tabligh* at the local level. It is *Aman* to God to go on *Tabligh*, and movement from place to place is known as *ghast*. Before the group sets out, each of the members ensure that they are well prepared, mentally, physically and materially - that is they have to be able to provide for their upkeep wherever they go; as well as being psychologically prepared to sustain the tempo of the requisite long hours of prayer and *dhikir*.²¹

When a *Tabligh* group sets out on a mission to a particular place, the mosque usually serves as the base for their operations. In places where mosques are few and far apart, they may camp at a home of a local prominent Muslim, if one volunteers to host them. On the first day of arrival at the mosque, the *Amiri* draws up a program and explains the procedure to be followed, detailing what is expected of each individual member. Duties are allotted to each member. The mission is divided into sessions, with prayer and *dhikir* taking up most of the time. On the next day, some of the members remain at the mosque to give religious instruction to any one that might come there (since the visit is well publicized prior to the arrival of the group); while others go out in pairs "to seek out the faithful resident in the area".²²

At the end of the day, an assessment of the day's work is done and the leader gives instructions: he reminds them of their avowed commitment to *Tabligh*, which is *kuzidua watu*, "to seek out the people". The benefit of committing oneself for the achievement of this task is the spiritual purification and upliftment, not least the reward promised to those who

²¹ Interview with Musa and Aslam, Amaku, 13th October 1991.

²² Interview with Musa, Amaku, 13th October 1991.

strive in God's cause.²³ This explains the emphasis on prayer and the reading of the scriptures throughout the session. An individual volunteers to awake the group at midnight for the night worship (*ta'jud*). This is the most important prayer time - when it is believed that all the doors of heaven are open and God listens to those who call upon Him. This is seen as the most appropriate time to pray for the success of the mission.

This procedure is repeated until the mission covers the targeted area. Ideally, a group should hold on for 4 months, but the local groups operating within Meru stay out for two to three weeks. It is said that one should go out on *Tabligh* for 40 days once every year. However, my informants were in agreement that going out on *tabligh* requires physical and mental fitness, not to mention the financial demand on the individuals, with self sponsorship being highly valued.²⁴ The characteristics of the mission fit well with those prescriptions laid down by the founder; nonetheless, this does not preclude local embellishments to *Tabligh*.

Local Adaptation of *Tabligh*

Though the spirituality of *Tabligh* is evident in the sufi practices that the movement has adopted, the local *Tabligh* teachers, were set out to impress upon their followers their own perception of the spirituality of *Tabligh*. The first example is the comparison drawn by an *Amiri* between the spiritual benefits of teaching in the *madrasa* and of going on *Tabligh* missions. This *Amiri* argued that "going out on *Tabligh* mission is more spiritually fulfilling than teaching in the *madrasa*". When I asked him why he thought that the mission was more spiritually fulfilling, his response was that he "would rather spend time asking for forgiveness from God and

²³ Those who strive in God's cause is the promise of salvation, ix:20. For more references on the reward promised for those who strive in the cause of God, see: xxii:78; xxv:52; xxix:69; lxi:11.

²⁴ Interview with Aslam, Amaku, 11th October 1991.

learning the verses of the Quran than spend most of the time teaching in the *madrasa* and the rest of it expecting gifts and reward from others for doing it".²⁵

He explained, that during *Tabligh* missions, the members of the group spend most of the time praying and reading the Quran. They sleep little and eat little. This, he said, is what is necessary for their spiritual nourishment, and it cannot be attained by teaching at the *madrasa*. It is not as if this *Amiri* is unaware that the acquisition and communication of knowledge is obligatory for every believer - he holds the view that *madrasa* teachers should not expect to be remunerated for fulfilling their religious obligation. He argues that if teaching at the *madrasa* is perceived in this sense, then the problem of the organization and maintenance of teachers would hardly arise.

The second example is Darwesh's local adaptation of public preaching and explaining the Quran in the local language. Many of my informants were in agreement that *Tabligh* in the area was pioneered by Darwesh.²⁶ He is credited with popularizing its ideals by translating and writing many books²⁷ in Kiswahili. With Arabic being inaccessible to the majority of the

²⁵ Interview with Aslam, Amaku, 13th October 1991. Provision of religious education in Meru is plagued by a perpetual scarcity of resources, both human and financial. As a result most of the teachers depend on charitable donations from a local prominent Asian Muslim since the large sums of money needed to pay commensurate salaries are hard to find. In addition, most of the Madrasa teachers that I interviewed were either western school dropouts or had no western education whatsoever, therefore, they were not employable in commercial or public sectors.

²⁶ Little information is available about Darwesh, except that he was an Asian of Pakistan origin who visited Meru on several occasions while on *Tabligh* mission from Moshi, Tanzania.

²⁷ Procurement and distribution of literature in Kiswahili is stated as one of the means of *Tabligh*: "The department has been collecting religious and other books from different embassies and also from abroad. These books have been distributed to the secondary schools and other places. Similarly, plans are

intended audience, the availability and simplicity of a widely distributed literature in Kiswahili, formed the mainstay of his mission. His practice of inviting learned sheikhs to explain the teachings of the Qur'an proved a useful resource. It is said that, before Darwesh came into the area public preaching and *tafsir* of the Quran were unpopular - the Muslims, from the start, maintained an aura of mystery about Islam, whose medium was Arabic, a language which inspired awe in non-Muslims and new converts alike.²⁸ To the surprise of many, therefore, Darwesh propagated the idea of public preaching and exegesis of Quranic verses and even advocated further explanations to be given in the local language,²⁹ if and when necessary.

underway to start a library...A special course has been planned for religious instructors...The department of *Tabligh* is responsible for the organization of this course..." See the *Tabligh* report. Some of these books that I came across are: *Fadha Ilid-Dahwaht Ilal-Khayr Wat-Tabligh-Lidinillah*, written in Arabic by Sheikh M. S. M. Yahya in India and rendered into Kiswahili as *Fadhila na Umuhimu wa Kulingania Kheir (Uislam) na Kublighisha Dini ya Mwenyezi Mungu kwa Watu*, by Sheikh M. Yusufu, Bukoba, Tanzania. This book emphasizes the importance of prayer and the uniqueness of the Holy Quran. Darwesh himself has written a series of books entitled *Kioo ya Amiri*, Tabligh-Markaz, Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania (n.d.). In *Kioo ya Amiri* no.3, (I have seen only Nos.3 and 4) the author describes what he considers first to be the requisites of 'Amiriship', that is the struggle against the self, the *nafsi*. No.4 outlines the duties of Amiri to the community.

²⁸ He revolutionized Islam in this area by trying to de-mystify it - I have shown in chapter 2 that mystification of Islam was one of the factors that tempered the reaction of the majority of the Meru people to the presence of a band of Muslims in their midst. Their 'Swahiliness' which was and still is synonymous with 'Muslimness', became associated with the practice of witchcraft, and the tendency was to keep the Muslims at bay.

²⁹ This is a recurrent point of discussion in the history of Islam in Africa - the issues of public preaching and the use of a language other than Arabic for religious purposes were dealt with by Al-Suyuti in his answers to questions arriving from Takrur in 1493. Al-Suyuti ruled that it is permissible to praise the Prophet in a language other than Arabic. See J. O. Hunwick, 1970:7-33.

Darwesh's apparently revolutionary ideas were soon to clash with those held by the local Muslims who advocated the perpetuation of this aura of mystery in which Islam in this area has been enshrouded since its early days. The principal points of disagreement, during the initial stages, revolved around the idea of public preaching and the use of the local language to define and explain religious concepts, they are usually expressed in Arabic and Kiswahili. In the first instance, the very idea of public preaching, appeared to many to be unislamic, it was perceived as "*kuiga tabia za watu wa dini nyingine*" ("to ape the behaviour of people of other religions")³⁰. It would also, they argued, cheapen or lower the quality of Islam. Darwesh's advocacy of the use of the local language to explain the fundamentals of Islam evoked even further criticism from the local sheikh and his prominent supporters. They objected to the use of Kimeru on two grounds: first, the Kimeru terms *Murungu* and *Ngai* for God were used by "people of other religions" and therefore, if the Muslim preachers used these terms for Allah, confusion might arise.³¹

The second, expressed by the local sheikh, was theological - the Kimeru terms *Murungu* and *Ngai* for God cannot be substituted for the Arabic term 'Allah' because they are, it is argued, not only inadequate as expressions of intrinsic attributes of Allah, but also inappropriate. One sheikh, went so far as to suggest that the word *Murungu* is associated by the Meru with the God of Mount Kenya, (to whom the Meru prayed prior to the advent of both Islam and Christianity)³² and *Ngai* with rain, both

³⁰ Sheikh Hussam, and other opponents of public preaching argued that it is too difficult to translate the term 'Tawheed', for instance, into any other language without distorting the whole concept.

³¹ Interview with Abdallah, Kangeta, 25th October 1991.

³² The Meru have a well developed concept of God who they call *Murungu*. The term *ngai*, which means rain, is also one of God's attributes since God provides rain. For the use of these two Kimeru attributes of God, see J. M. Baikiao 1972:167-8.

of which border on *shirk*, or the association of God with others. Therefore, it was and still is felt that explanation of Quranic verses in Kimeru is likely to distort the message. This argument hinges on the notion of the religious mystique of Arabic - it is the language of the Quran and hence the language of Islam.

Yet, interestingly enough, the sheikhs do not object to the Kiswahili term *Mungu* for God. Once I pointed out to this sheikh that not only do the two terms *Mungu* and *Murungu* have the same 'Bantu' linguistic root, but are actually derivatives of one and the same term. His reaction was that Kiswahili, because of its "similarity to Arabic", is richer in religious vocabulary and is, therefore, less likely to distort the message when explaining certain religious concepts. He echoes the arguments advanced in support of the constant use of Kiswahili by Muslims (see chapter 2).

The point here, however, is not to question the validity of this argument, but to show the clash occasioned by Darwesh's advocacy of the use of Kimeru to explain religious teachings.

The controversy over the choice of language for religious purpose is not peculiar to Meru. In Ujiji, a town in Tanzania (of which previous mention has been made), a controversy arose regarding the use of other languages than Arabic for religious purposes:

the argument for holding the Quran in Arabic and not Swahili as it is in other parts of East Africa was fear of widespread uncovering of interpretations of the Quran, which are not backed by revealed text, but which have been transmitted by local Muslims.³³

Similarly, in Meru the argument for the use of Arabic was based on the fear of rendering new and supposedly erroneous interpretations of the Quran.

³³ J. L. Balda, 1990:284.

However, the two cases differ in that the leaders in Ujiji discouraged even the use of Kiswahili, while in Meru Kiswahili was preferred to the local language (Kimeru).

The use of the Kiswahili term *Mungu* for Allah, is given an interesting treatment by Topan. On the one hand, his argument lends credence to the sheikh's idea, that other terms are inadequate as expressions of Allah's attributes:

Theologically, the word 'Mngu' was deemed insufficient to convey the full potency of the original model, Allah. A fuller disclosure necessitated the addition of a qualifier which in Swahili is 'Mwenye enzi', shortened to 'Mwenyezi': compound word of Bantu and Arabic origin (from *izza*) which primarily expresses the omnipotence, sovereignty and regality of the Almighty. Why was 'Mngu' not replaced by 'Allah'? The answer... lies in the fact of the pre-existence of the concept of Godhood among the Swahili and the Bantu, however termed. What was necessary was to invest the indigenous term with connotations of uniqueness and power as conceived in Islam, i.e to re-define it in terms of the new faith... rather to qualify it...³⁴

On the other hand, his argument does not answer the question why the Kimeru word *Murungu*, which is the equivalent of the Kiswahili *Mungu* is deemed inappropriate. The Kiswahili word is, according to Topan, acceptable because of the underpinning Bantu idea of Godhood. In the same vein, the term *Murungu* would be acceptable, but it is not. Paradoxically, the sheikh rejects it because it is deemed to connote the very Bantu idea of God. We may therefore, say that the sheikh's first argument (that the use of Kimeru terms for God might engender confusion with other religions) is the more plausible reason why substitutes for the Arabic term are objectionable.

³⁴ F. Topan, 1991:6-7.

In spite of this objection to the use of Kimeru for preaching and teaching, the *Tabligh* teachers, with the sole aim of making converts, and faced with a situation whereby most of the would-be converts in the rural areas, especially women, are monolingual, realized that they did not have much choice if they had to achieve any measure of success.

Tabligh preaching activities were augmented with occasional trips by Meru delegates to Tanzania and the coastal towns for further instruction in the organization of *Tabligh*. Some of these individuals have been instrumental in the propagation of Islam. A good example is Mama Salwa who lives at the mosque that is known as the Markaz. She told me that she was converted in 1949, but the advent of *Tabligh* has changed her perception of Islam. She herself is illiterate, but she has learnt many verses of the Quran and she has been trying to organize the local Muslim women and even give them lessons on how to pray and observe other religious obligations. She laments that there are too many obstacles to religious commitment of women in this area. However, she can count more than thirty women who have converted to Islam through her efforts, since she joined *Tabligh*.³⁵

Another example is Aslam, who claims to have converted 420 people through teaching and preaching during 1988 alone. In the absence of documented statistical evidence, it is difficult to confirm or deny his claims.³⁶ In my attempt to gauge the influence of *Tabligh* in this area, I interviewed a random sample of 50 Muslims among whom 18 claimed to have converted through *Tabligh*; 7 during the 1984 famine when food (which was said to have been donated by Muslims) was distributed to the

³⁵ Interview with Mama Salwa, Kiengu, 8th October 1991.

³⁶ Three new mosques of wood and iron sheets have been built in the area. When I tried to investigate attendance and size of their congregations, I found that they ranged between 5 and 15 members. Perhaps there are others who do not attend the mosque.

worst hit areas; 8 said that they converted in order to be protected from witchcraft; 5 were members of the pioneer families converted prior to 1980; 4 were recent converts through marriage to Muslims; 4 were non-Meru residents (Borana and Somali) who were either working or living in the district; 3 claimed to have converted as a result of long residence in former N.F.D.; and 1 through by a close Muslim friend. These figures show that there has been an appreciable influence of *Tabligh* in Igembe - the larger proportion of the most recent conversion occurred as a result of *Tabligh* activities.

As *Tabligh* made progress slowly, entering what can be considered as its second phase, its incompatibility with some of the ideas propagated by the sheikhs³⁷ became apparent. For instance, it was opposed to what the Amiri sees as an inordinate reverence accorded the (patron) sheikhs by the local Muslims. As has been shown in chapter 4, these sheikhs were believed to possess mystical and healing powers, for the use of which they received gifts in cash and kind. It was on account of this that one Sheikh Shariff, a leading Husseiniyya sheikh, was driven out of the area, allegedly for practices which were said by the local leaders to be anti-*Tabligh*.

It is alleged that Sheikh Sharraf used the reading of *falaq* books as a ploy. He was accused of using his magical powers for self-aggrandizement - after "reading the books for" his opponents, evil was sure to befall them. Some of his practices included writing his victims' names on rotten eggs, which was believed to cause madness, among other evils. To the ordinary people, these magical practices inspired awe, which he turned into an asset. He used to obtain goats from those seeking blessings (*baraka*) from him. To

³⁷ The failure of the Borana influence within the well established Swahili-Nubi cultural and religious milieu of Mjini, and the apparent success of the N.F.D. sheikhs' influence in the trade centres and other rural areas of Igembe, are examined in chapter 4, pp. 177-182.

the *Tabligh* advocates, these proscribed beliefs and practices had to be curbed forthwith, hence he was banished from his base at Lare mosque.³⁸

The case of this sheikh is a pointer to the changes brought about by *Tabligh* and the resultant imbalance in the existing religious situation in Igembe. It was difficult, it seems, for the hitherto awe-inspiring patron sheikhs to accept to be relegated to a subsidiary role to that of the Amiri, most of whom were young, and in the eyes of the sheikhs could not boast either long experience in religious matters or Islamic learning.

The proponents of *Tabligh*, like the sheikhs, are given to the chanting of litanies, *dhikir*. The austerity that manifests itself during *Tabligh* missions, is characteristically similarly reminiscent of sufistic tendencies. This being the case, then I suppose that there are other aspects responsible for the tension between the existing local perception of Islam, as taught and practiced by both the sheikhs and their followers; and the *Tabligh* advocates. On the one hand, the sheikhs had, by the time *Tabligh* was introduced into the area, established a particular pattern of religious observance and their methods of dealing with the matters of faith had become accepted by the local people, (see chapter 3). One of these practices was the cleansing of believers who had, for one reason or another, backslid. It is common to hear the expression that "so and so has become an unbeliever", "*amekufuru*". It is a widely held belief that once an individual has been initiated into an order s/he is expected to uphold its principles.

³⁸ At one time, Lare had a fairly large number of Borana Muslims. It is said that Sheikh Shariff had become quite influential and famous for his ability to cure many diseases and also to inflict harm on his own behalf, or of his clients for which he charged a fee. Fisher draws a parallel on that of a Muslim cleric in Africa and the biblical episode of Elisha's healing of Naaman the leper. Fisher calls this harming/healing combination in the role of the cleric "the Gehazi factor" (H. Fisher, 1985:171). For the details of Elisha's power to cure of Naaman of his leprosy and to visit Naaman's leprosy on Gehazi, see 2 Kings, 5:1-27.

Laxity begets calamity. In the event, the common practice in Igembe was to seek the help of a sheikh.

A case in point is that of M'Ibuuri, a pioneer convert, who is said to have "drifted" away and lost his Muslim identity:

M'Ibuuri was involved in a long standing legal tussle with his non-Muslim neighbour over a piece of land. Land cases in this area are known to be long and difficult to solve. An alternative solution for such cases is found in the traditional oath of "striking a he-goat (*kuringa Nthenge*)". M'Ibuuri, being the eldest son, was duty bound to save the piece of land for the family so he took the oath. It is understandable that after participating in the rituals of the oath, he felt that he had compromised his Muslim identity and dropped the habit of going to the mosque. Gradually he distanced himself from his Muslim friends, who now spoke of him as one who "had become an unbeliever", *amekufuru*. After several years of a troubled conscience, he spoke to the Imam of the mosque who suggested that they seek the help of Sheikh Assim (from former N.F.D) who was residing in the area. The sheikh said that in order for him to be reinstated to his former status (of piety) a cleansing ceremony was a prerequisite. The Imam and the teacher were invited to witness the cleansing. My informant did not divulge the details of the rituals that the sheikh carried out for the purposes of cleansing, but the slaughter of a ram was a major element of the ritual, after which it was believed that no evil would befall him. His identity was restored and he was brought back to the fold.³⁹

³⁹ This case was described to me by Sheikh Mwinyi (interview 18th November 1991). The main part of the ritual is the circumambulation of the disputed piece of land by the appellant, the defendant and some witnesses (elders). A gagged goat is strapped on the appellant's back and the defendant walks behind, striking the goat and swearing each time that 'I die like this goat if my claim to the land is false'. Both men are naked and women and children are not allowed to witness the oathing. *Kuringa nthenge* (lit. to strike the goat) is a very serious form of oath, sanctioned by the clan council of elders only in extreme circumstances. The attendant curse is believed to pass on from one generation to another. "As a rule only the defendant does it to prove his innocence, if he is really guilty, his *kiama* (council) will not allow him to do it as this is supposed to affect his whole subdivision or clan". See E. B. Horne, District Commissioner 1908 - in DC/MRU/1/1 Meru Political Recordbook, 1908-1918.

This is but one example of the practices that the *Tabligh* advocates were quick to condemn. My informant Amiri Aslam condemned this case for two reasons: in the first instance, the sheikh's notion of purification and restoration of the victim to his former status, is redolent of the Meru practice of slaughtering a ram and using its blood symbolically to cleanse a person who has become ritually 'unclean' (a condition known as *muiro* in Kimeru) either through individual negligence or accidental breach of certain taboos; or that of others related to them. Aslam therefore did not only condemn the ritual performed by the sheikh as un-Islamic; but was also branded it as unequivocally *ushenzi* practice. Furthermore, the victim erred both in intent and deed - striking the goat to death in this manner (see footnote), not to mention the swearing that went with it, was the height of unbelief. In other words, he had relapsed to his former condition of unbelief (and in this light, of *ushenzi*). Being of sound mind, it was his choice and therefore, he was fully accountable for his own actions.

The second reason for condemning this case derives from the first - if the offender is fully responsible for his own actions, and therefore answerable only to his creator, what business has the sheikh in trying to intercede for him? Here not only the sheikh's putative ability to cleanse and supposedly restore one's faith is objectionable, but the propriety of the whole practice is questionable. When I asked him what measures he would take if he were confronted with such a case, the Amiri said that:

it is the duty of every Muslim to forbid evil and enhance goodness by pointing out to others where they go wrong, but this does not entail cleansing rituals. Every believer knows that only God is 'Most Gracious, Most Merciful'; and therefore it is a waste of time to seek help from another person when one has erred to God".⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Sheikh Mwinyi said that he objected to the cleansing rituals, but since the other sheikh also claimed religious authority based on his learning, it became a question of interpretation between the two men of learning.

To put this case in broader context of what is now happening in Meru and perhaps many other places far from the traditional abode of Islam at the East African coast, the local sheikh serves as the source of religious authority. And since, as the saying goes, 'every sheikh has his own way', there is growing tension between the local interpretations which arise from local sources of religious authority, and what is perceived as the established Swahili-Islamic model. The difference of opinion between the two sheikhs is indicative of this tension. In the discussion on N.F.D. influence, it was shown that the Somali and Borana sheikhs provided the much needed religious leadership to the Muslims living in the trade centres and other areas away from the influence of the Swahili Muslims in Majengo and Mjini. This tension between the established Islamic ideals and the local manifestations of Islam is documented by Balda:

There is a relentless desire of presenting the ideals of Islam and a perfect model of the Islamic faith to the Muslim believer, but a persistent tension prevails among divergent factions each of which insists that its own interpretations are authentically based on divine revelation (Quran).⁴¹

On the other hand, the apparently extremist interpretation of religious teachings by the *Tabligh* teachers triggered a stiff opposition from several quarters. This could be illustrated with the case of Aslam, mentioned above, who began to propagate such ideas as that *Tabligh* should be regarded as the Hajji for the poor who cannot afford to go to Mecca; that those who make donations to support *Tabligh* will be rewarded a hundred-fold on the Day of Judgement; that those who cry and weep for their misdeeds will be forgiven; and that those who observe strict discipline and lose desire for all worldly things will attain paradise. More radical were ideas about etiquette: for instance, "when you go out to preach, avoid looking at other peoples' property as such an act is likely to evoke a desire

⁴¹ J. L. Balda, 1993:237.

for it" - desire is seen as evil, "because it breeds envy and consequently weakens the struggle against the *nafsi*", the self, as he put it during my interview with him.⁴² Such interpretations of religious concepts were, to many of the local prominent Muslims, clearly unacceptable, prompting one leader to suggest that:

The department of *Tabligh* should carry out a thorough investigation, because now it seems that it is in danger as it appears to be different from the faith; with many aspects being contradictory to Islam, tending to sow discord among the people... and also challenging the methods of imparting religious education judiciously.⁴³

Though there is no evidence to indicate that this suggestion was implemented, or even to link it with the subsequent events, it was not long before the Amiri was asked to desist from spreading his ideas. However, it took some time to stop him and the disagreement developed into what looks like a struggle between the old and the new. Today, he does not attend the Friday prayers at the Markaz but prays in a smaller mosque not too far from his house and spends the rest of the time in his shop, the revenue from which he supplements with extra income earned from a large number of clients who seek treatment from him for all types of maladies.

It may be useful, however, to note that the image of *Tabligh* in the perception of the local people is bolstered by occasional visits by groups of devotees (*vikundi vya Tabligh*), who come from as far as Pakistan and India to the Markaz in Igembe. The visitors are accompanied by local Amiri, who not only guide them through the local mosques, but also act as interpreters during the teaching sessions. I attended one of these sessions where the speakers spoke only Arabic and Urdu, while the local sheikh gave the

⁴² *Tabligh* espouses the sufi doctrine of self denial. My informant puts this in his own understanding of the insatiable worldly desires of the self, the *nafsi* (interview with Aslam, 11th October 1991).

⁴³ "*Ripoti ya Naibu wa Mwenyekiti, Mkoa Mashariki*". p.5.

translation in Kiswahili. On one of these visits which lasted three weeks, 30 new converts: seventeen men and thirteen women were won.⁴⁴ It is therefore evident that *Tabligh* has had an appreciable impact on the spread of Islam in this area.

In effect, what one sees in the subsequent years after 1980, is a steady, albeit slow and almost unnoticeable, spread of Islam especially in the northern (Igembe) part of the district. Mosques in the area have increased in number and this increase can be seen as an index of the growing Muslim influence.

Proliferation of Mosques

The first mosque outside Meru town was the one built by the Abashi (Abssynians) in Mutuati trade centre, opened in 1927. The mosque was used mainly by the Abashi traders up till 1939 when the trade centre was closed.⁴⁵ After the closure of Mutuati, the mosque was demolished and its materials were transferred to Lare trade centre in 1940 and used for the construction of a mosque, which remained the only public mosque⁴⁶ in the whole of Igembe for almost twenty years. But during the last 15 years, beginning 1975, the number of mosques in the whole of Meru has risen to

⁴⁴ During my field work, I came across a group of visitors touring the area around Kiengu Markaz and another at Ngundune in Tigania. They spoke only Urdu and Arabic through an interpreter. When I enquired, I gathered that they were *Tablighis* from Pakistan. I was also struck by the reverence with which they were treated by the local people.

⁴⁵ The closure of Mutuati due to what was considered clandestine activities by people from Ethiopia, Abashi, is discussed in chapter 1, p. 64.

⁴⁶ One migrant trader at Kangeta, had a small mosque used by his family and visitors from N.F.D. during the occasional *maulid* celebrations held there.

21, the majority of which have been financed externally.⁴⁷ Meru municipality alone has five mosques.

In 1981, a leading Meru sheikh gave a resume of Islam in Igembe in the following Kiswahili extract from "*Sauti Ya Meru*", which I will render into English thus:

'Islam has very many followers in Igembe'.

It is thought by many people that, Islam here in Meru has few adherents, the truth is that it has many adherents. The fact that can confirm this is the number of mosques, though there are many other indicators. Muslims in Meru have 13 mosques which have been completed, and another six have been planned to be built. There is a Friday mosque which is the biggest in Meru town; others are Mjini, Majengo, Makandune, Chuka, Lare, Mikinduri, Kangeta, Maua, Kiengu, Amaku, Athiru and Ngusishi in Timau. The greatest number of mosques are in Igembe division, and even the six that have been planned, will be built in Igembe.

Though there is a certain proportion of Muslims in the areas where those mosques have been built, the place with the greatest number of Muslims is Amaku (Antubetwe) in Igembe. When "*Sauti ya Meru*" enquired the reason why there are more Muslims there than in Meru town, the sheikh...who is also the chairman of *Tabligh* in Eastern Province, said that this is the case because that is his home area and he has been involved in teaching them Islam; and they have followed his example. At one time, he, with the help of the area sub-chief, endeavoured to put an end to witchcraft activities (*vitendo vya uchawi*) in Athiru and they have since ceased. One of the important activities of Muslims here in Meru is the provision of "madarasa" education. There is madarasa education in all the areas with Muslims, but the largest is the one known as "Meru Muslim Community Madarasa", which is near "*Sauti ya Meru*" office...⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Between 1984 and 1986, two magnificent new mosques were constructed within Meru municipality. One of them was funded by a wealthy sheikh from Kuwait. A number of mosques have also been built by local individuals, thus each one has its own history.

⁴⁸ See *Sauti ya Meru*, Jumatatu (Monday), Julai 27, 1981. Mobile Printing Unit, Meru. This past issue of *Sauti ya Meru* was given to me by the sheikh, during one of my visits to his residence. The extract that I have quoted, is part of his report on Islam in Meru for this magazine which is appropriately called the

The Sheikh's statement can be regarded as a testimony to the increasing Islamic influence in the area. It is important to note that he begins by correcting what he sees as an erroneous impression about Islam in Meru. He cites the growing number of mosques as one of the indicators of growth of the Muslim following. Six new mosques were planned in Igembe alone, and they have since been built.⁴⁹ Most of the funds for the construction of these mosques (though most of them are semi-permanent structures of wood and iron sheets) is obtained as donations from organizations and rich individuals through a leading local Asian Muslim who is well connected with Pakistan and some Muslim organizations outside the country. He has made it his duty to build mosques and run the affairs of Muslims in this area.

In 1983, the Honorary Director-General of the Islamic Foundation

stressed the importance of mosques in the life of a Muslim and for the dissemination and establishment of Islam. He laid equal emphasis on the proper upkeep of mosques and the need to develop them again into regular places of worship and centres of Islamic activities and functions. The importance of building new mosques and generating mosque-consciousness and constant love for them was also driven home.⁵⁰

'Voice of Meru', but unfortunately no longer in circulation.

⁴⁹ Also there are others which have been proposed and plots for the construction have been obtained or are in the process of being obtained. The report prepared by the chairman of the committee that looks after the mosques in the area lists 16 mosques in Igembe alone, perhaps because it includes even those that have been planned but not built as yet.

⁵⁰ Mtito Adei mosque in in Machakos was opened on 4th December 1983. In his opening address during the well-attended opening ceremony, the Honorary Director-General of Islamic Foundation, Br. Muhammad Aktar Rao, stressed the importance of building and maintaining mosques, see *Al-Islam*, Vol.8, No.2, June 1984.

This proliferation of mosques in Meru can be accounted for in either of the two ways: either as part of the scheme by *Tabligh* activists to disseminate Islam; or as an index of the actual growth and development of Islam in the area. New mosques are known to have been built after disagreement over the administration and control of the existing ones, nevertheless, one hardly finds a mosque where there are no Muslims to make use of it. For each of the mosques that I visited outside the municipal precincts, there were Muslims, at least a family, living in the vicinity of the mosque. It could well be that the increase in the number of mosques reflects an increasing Islamic influence, a new phase for Islam in the area.

Of particular significance is the mosque at Kiengu, approximately four miles from Maua town. To the local Muslims, it is known as Marikaz, derived from the Arabic term *Al-Markaz*, which means centre. The history of Kiengu mosque is, in a sense, the history of the growth of Islam in this part of Meru. One version of it says that between 1961 and 1964, Lare being the only public mosque in the whole of Igembe, a handful of Muslims (11 families) living in and around Kiengu prayed under a tree on the site where the Markaz stands today, with Sheikh Ramadhan from Kina as the teacher.⁵¹ In 1964, through a collective effort, they put up a temporary structure of wood and mud on this site donated to them by one Hamisi. In 1967, the road to Meru National Park was made,⁵² through Kiengu. As I have said in chapter 4, Muslims in Igembe had all along maintained stronger ties with the former N.F.D. than with Majengo and Mjini, this road (which passed near the mosque site) therefore, by providing a direct link between Igembe and the Kina region, facilitated a two-way traffic: people in Igembe could easily travel to Kina and beyond to the former N.F.D. and vice versa. The mosque, now strategically located beside the new road,

⁵¹ Interview with Mustafa, Kiengu, 12th October 1991.

⁵² The road to Meru National Park links Igembe with Kina, which has a significant Muslim population, mainly the Borana.

provided an appropriate staging post. However, for lack of a quorum, that is 40 male worshippers in attendance, which, according to the *Shafi* school of law, is a necessary condition for Friday sermon (*khutba*), they performed only mid-day (*dhuhur*) prayers on Fridays.⁵³

Later on, with the help of an Asian trader at Maua who donated building materials, a better structure of corrugated iron sheets and cement was put up. Thanks to a *Tabligh* group from Pakistan who visited the Masjid-al-Noor (that was the original name of Kiengu mosque) early in 1981 and offered financial assistance for the construction of a permanent mosque. By this time, *Tabligh* was gaining ground in the area and therefore, it was decided that the site should be consecrated before the construction took place. Darwesh, (the revered *Tabligh* leader, mentioned above) sent a group of 15 Sufis to determine the direction of the Qibla of the mosque which would henceforth become Al-Markaz. The leading Asian Muslim, whose missionary work has been responsible for much of the growth of Islam in this part of Meru since the beginning of the 1980s, undertook the construction of the mosque. It was completed in 1982.

The Markaz has come to be looked upon as the Muslim centre in Igembe. To many Muslims, the replacement of the insignificant - looking structure which for many years served as the mosque, with the 'magnificent' Markaz is an indication of Muslim triumph. The Markaz is a monumental testimony to their present success.⁵⁴ When I first went there, I found

⁵³ The disagreement between Sheikh Hiloli and Sheikh Omar over the issue of *khutba* at this mosque is examined in chapter 4 (pp.196-197). The one advocated the reading of *khutba* to a congregation of less than 40 on the grounds that, the sparsity of the resident Muslim population is sufficient justification for the reading of *khutba* to those in attendance; while the other insisted on the fulfillment of the stipulated requirements.

⁵⁴ As has been said above, with the exception of the mosque at Lare and the Markaz, other mosques in this area are semi-permanent structures, made of wood and iron sheets.

Mama Salwa, an elderly woman who looks after the mosque. She introduced herself as "the Mother of the Markaz". Explaining why she lives in a house on the mosque compound, Mama Salwa said that "Markaz should not be left without a permanent resident to look after it and to receive any guest that might come in any time". By virtue of her residence at the mosque, she has become an important personality in the administration of its affairs.⁵⁵

Since Markaz is the Muslim centre in Igembe many Muslims walk long distances to attend the Friday prayer there. Its central role in Igembe is also due to the absence of Imams or madrasa teachers or other qualified individuals who can lead the prayers in many of the smaller mosques. Furthermore, I observed that many of the women were unable to actually perform prayers, ignorant as they were of the details of the various postures, to say nothing of praying in Arabic. For them therefore, the congregational Friday prayer compensates for their inability to pray on their own at other times. Indeed, a good number of women said that they pray only on Fridays when they come to the Markaz to hear the *khutba*.⁵⁶ On the whole, most of the informants, said that the spiritual significance of congregational prayer was the main reason for this pattern of long Friday treks to Markaz.⁵⁷ For instance, I met a man who told me that he walks

⁵⁵ Mama Salwa lives at the mosque. She looks after the children who attend the *madrasa*. She said that she gave up everything to come and live there because she felt that the "Markaz is special and it should not be without a devoted attendant" (interview 8th October 1991).

⁵⁶ The sermons are well attended. It was difficult to find out the themes of the various sermons from the informants, but from those that I attended, the themes varied and the emphasis shifted from one to another. For instance on one occasion, the Imam emphasized unity among the local Muslims. The theme of unity was well in context because only two days before that two factions had fought at the mosque, with the result that the police were called into the mosque. On another, a guest speaker elaborated on the importance of living one's faith - that is a Muslims should stand out among others, be seen to be different.

⁵⁷ Segregation of sexes is taken seriously, therefore, since there is no provision for women to pray separately in the main mosque building, the veranda is partitioned with a curtain to create a section for the women during Friday prayer,

10 miles, beginning his journey on Thursday evening so as to attend the Friday prayers at this mosque. When I suggested that he could go to another mosque which is only 5 miles away from his home, he seized the opportunity to enumerate what he believed to be the benefits of this long journey for the sole purpose of praying at the Markas. Having been a Catholic prior to his conversion to Islam, this man compared the Markaz with a cathedral in prestige and function for the local Muslims. And indeed it is, when compared to other local mosques which are semi-permanent made of wood and iron sheets. Also it serves as the headquarters, for all the other mosques in the area are administered from there: the provisions are stored there and the mosque chairman is in charge of the committee that is responsible for the distribution of such items as blankets, clothing which come as donations to the Muslims in the area (see below) and construction materials for maintenance of the other mosques.

With the exception of the Markaz, Lare and Kina, the other mosques in this area are much smaller, most of them being temporary wood-and-iron structures. It is interesting to observe that a good number of them were built either by individuals on their own plots of land, or through individual efforts. Seven others were obtained by the now defunct Igembe Muslim Committee. Describing these mosques and the role that they play, one of these pioneers, whose family mosque has now developed into a fairly big mosque, with a regularly attended *madrassa* and a resident teacher, said that:

These small mosques were initially founded as places for 'giving birth' to Muslims (meaning to convert people to Islam) within a particular locality.⁵⁸

But when the attendance is high, women sit outside the mosque. As said in chapter 5 (pp. 219-221) laxity and flouting of the rules of segregation of men and women during the celebration of *maulid*, is one of the issues hotly contested by the anti-*maulid* activists in the raging *maulid* debate in Meru.

⁵⁸ Interview with Hussam, Amaku, 11th September 1991.

It should be remarked that since these mosques, are normally found near the homes of prominent Muslims, it is not unusual to find a sheikh or sometimes the teacher, using such homes as a base for providing his medical and divinatory services which are usually in great demand by both Muslims and non-Muslims. For instance, one day I visited the homestead of a prominent local Muslim and by some strange coincidence I had the fortune of meeting one of the most revered Borana sheikhs in the area.⁵⁹ He had come on a routine visit, but of course on such visits he sees many clients particularly those with health-related problems. I observed that there were three 'guests' waiting to see him. He had a room in the main house where the guests went in turn to see him. When my turn came, I went in and before I could explain the purpose of my visit, he began to prepare himself for the session. When I said research was the purpose of my visit, he relaxed but insisted that I should drink some water which he had prayed over. In the process, I gathered that the other three 'guests' were patients needing treatment. He explained that during some of these treatment sessions some of the clients became Muslims. If any of them decided to convert, the sheikh took them to the mosque, which is only three hundred yards outside the precincts of the homestead, and "after giving them the shahada",⁶⁰ he declared them Muslims. On other occasions, clients coming from far would first wait at or near the mosque, where they would be sure to see him during the times of prayer.

However, it would be misleading to give the impression that in these mosques, one finds large congregations at each prayer time. In half of the ones that I visited at different prayer times, I found between five and ten

⁵⁹ The role of Sheikh Hiloli as a healer has been discussed in chapter 4, pp. 194-195.

⁶⁰ The phrase "giving the shahada" means that those wishing to convert to Islam declare their intention in front of the sheikh who then teaches them to make the profession of the faith, that 'I believe that there is no god but Allah and Mohammed is His Prophet'. Then they are given 'religious' (Arabic) names and told not to eat meat from dead animals or drink alcohol.

people; while in others, only the teacher, the *madrasa* pupils and a few adults observed regular attendance. The significant point for us is that many new congregations, irrespective of their size, have been established within a period of 15 years by rallying individuals around a mosque. I also observed that in two mosques, children from non-Muslim families were admitted into the *madrasa* and given Islamic religious education. In one mosque, for instance, the teacher told me that, out of a total of 24 children, 14 were from non-Muslim families; while in another, there were 9 such children out of a total of 28. When I enquired from both teachers what was the reason for this, their response was that since

every child is born a Muslim and only to be taught otherwise by the guardians, this is the opportunity to bring children back to the fold. It is also a way of spreading Islam.⁶¹

The mosques here also serve as centres for the distribution of *sadaqa*, or gifts which are normally brought by a prominent Muslim either from abroad or from the well-to-do Muslims in other parts of the country. At one time, 1,200 items: blankets, *kanzu*, *leso* and dresses were distributed to Muslims in this area.⁶² These items were given only to Muslims, which therefore suggests that there is a large number of Muslims, which is not reflected in the often scanty and irregular mosque attendance that one see in this area. This leads the discussion to the pertinent question of the nature of this Islamic influence. In other words, what are the salient characteristics of Islam in this area?

⁶¹ Half of the children at the Markaz *madrasa* are residents. Their teacher explained that residence at the centre was necessary to ensure that the children were not distracted. These children have no access to western education.

⁶² One of the committee that is responsible for the distribution as well as the administration of the mosques, explained that the converts, especially "women need help with the religious dresses", meaning long dresses, "so as to encourage them and some of them may not be able to buy this type of dress". Interview with Mustafa, Markaz, 12th October 1991.

Dynamics of Conversion

So far , the evidence assembled above points to a growing Islamic influence in the area in question. However, it is not enough to suggest that *Tabligh* has been instrumental in this growth; it is necessary to go a little further and examine the effects of this Muslim presence and influence. In other words, to ask about the force and scope of *Tabligh* influence: has it changed those who as a result of it have converted and to what extent? Have those who have converted really changed their way of life as a result or have they been engaged in a mere outward profession of faith?

A closer look at the local situation reveals an underlying cleavage between the Majengo and Mjini residents who exhibit an established Islamic character, and the new *Tabligh* converts whose conversion is limited to acquiring an Arabic name and visiting the mosques during the calendrical religious festivals. On one occasion, Sheikh Ahmed (of whom previous mention has been made) in spite of his appreciation of the growing Muslim influence in this area, showed an ambivalent attitude towards the converts, dismissing them as "*Inshallah* Muslims".

The only advantage is that they are increasing in quantity, though not in quality. But there is great hope that their children will be better Muslims in the future.⁶³

The point to note here is that conversion is taking place in this region for the first time without the attendant acculturation that was hitherto, prior to the advent of *Tabligh*, regarded as an integral part of the conversion process. This can be illustrated by the case of Asuman's two wives. Being a Muslim, Asumani had found it very difficult to find a wife, for no self respecting elder in Igembe would marry his daughter to one who had become a Muslim (in other words a Swahili). The only alternative open to

⁶³ Interview with Sheikh Ahmed, Mjini, 26th October 1991.

Asumani was to find a Christian girl (there were a few Christian families in the area in the late 1940s) who had been exposed to Christian missionary influence and would perhaps find it easier to embrace another faith. She herself had this to say:

At that time (1950) there were no Muslim families living in this area, but Asuman felt that I needed to be instructed in the Muslim etiquette. So I went to live with a Muslim family in Lare for several months during which, Mama Ali instructed me on how to be a good Muslim woman. I learnt how to pray from my husband, but Mama Ali taught me how to observe *tohara*; how to cook good food - you see my husband had become used to such things as rice, tea and spiced food while living in N.F.D. Therefore, it was necessary for me to learn how to prepare this kind of food; and also be able to host his guests when they come during the *maulid*. I had to adopt a new life-style altogether. My husband did not want me to embarrass him by being clumsy like a *mshenzi*. He expected me to show that now I was a changed person.⁶⁴

The full details of this education process that she underwent for a period of three months may not be accessible to us; nevertheless, it is clear from these few points that observance of such outward signs as mode of dress and food were the treasured attributes of a 'true Muslim'. Hence it was deemed necessary for Amina to learn the Swahili culture even before she could live with her husband and the training she received from Mama Ali for several months was considered to be an integral part of the Islamization process. Amina can read the Quran (though she admitted that she can barely understand what she reads); she goes to the mosque regularly; maintains a distinctive mode of dress; speaks Swahili and cooks the Swahili type of food. Sarah, his younger wife, did not undergo such a process of acculturation and the discrepancy in conformity to the external

⁶⁴ I visited Asumani's homestead several times during my field work. Even to an observer, the discrepancy in the levels of Swahilization between his two wives is striking, Amina went through a process of acculturation which is evident in her use of external signs of compliance, unlike Sarah who did not undergo such a process and therefore shows no signs of external trappings of Swahili-Islamic culture.

signs of compliance between the two women is striking to an observer. Sahra, like most *Tabligh* converts, cannot read Arabic or even perform her prayers correctly.

Here, I will examine the dynamics of this conversion, in particular, the reasons for and events leading to conversion. A significant proportion of these, claimed to have been nominal Catholics prior to conversion. For instance two of my informants said that they had failed to raise children in their first marriages, and out of the "necessity to beget children", they left the church in order to marry a second wife. Islamic advocacy of polygamy offered an alternative to the Catholic ideals of monogamy. In order to explain the significance of this claim, it is necessary for us to put it in the relevant Meru cultural context. Children are highly valued among the Meru. The images of procreation are reflected in every aspect of daily life in various contexts, including jokes. For instance, it is not uncommon for one to hear an older person shouting to a younger person: "may you increase the others" (meaning my best wish for you is the ability to have many children), especially when he is feigning annoyance. If an individual dies either before child-bearing age, or as an adult without begetting children, his name is not to be mentioned at any time. Indeed it becomes a taboo to mention the name of such a person. They are supposed to be forgotten. At death, the body of such a person is disposed of in a different manner from that of one who has descendants. It is clear therefore that no person would wish to incur such a misfortune on themselves and their family. Seen in this light, it was incumbent upon the men to give themselves a second, and even a third chance, if necessary, to beget children. The way to do this is to marry more than one wife, which one cannot do if one is a member of the church.

Admittedly, the Catholic and the Methodist churches are fairly strong in Meru district.⁶⁵ From the personal accounts of informants, I gathered that a great majority of those who claimed to have been members of either church prior to conversion, had been nominal members. However, there were many who were not Christians and hence there are many cases which can furnish an interesting analysis of the reasons for conversion of non-Christians to Islam.

Nowadays the religious situation of the majority of the people in many parts of Kenya is rather ambiguous. In Meru, it is difficult to categorize the beliefs of many people as either Christian or African traditional. The reason for this ambiguity being that many of the traditional Meru social-political institutions have disintegrated as a result of a rapid process of westernization. Attitudes and values have changed - many hitherto auspicious occasions, sacred items, places and animals,⁶⁶ have lost their sacredness. A good example is Njaambene, the sacred mountain on which the Meru went "to pray during the most important occasions of tribal event or need"⁶⁷ but whose summit is now desacralized by the installation of a satellite to boost telecommunications in the northern part of the district. Similarly, the huge Meru forest, believed during the early years of this century to be inhabited by evil spirits,⁶⁸ has been bulldozed by estate

⁶⁵ It has been said that the first Methodist mission was opened at Kaaga, near Meru town in 1910 (Nthamburi (1982:20). The first Catholic missions were opened in Imenti and Igoji in 1911 (Catholic Directory of East Africa, 1965, TMP Book department, Tabora). The Presbyterian Church of East Africa (P.C.E.A.) came to Chogoria, in the southern part of the district at about the same time.

⁶⁶ J. M. Baikiao, 1977:129-162, in his discussion of the concept of the sacred among the Meru, provides a detailed description of the sacred personalities, places, colours, numbers, items, animals and plants.

⁶⁷ Ibid.p. 132.

⁶⁸ It has been said in chapter 1 (p.27) that when the first European administrator arrived in Meru, he was allowed to set up in the forest which was believed to be the abode of powerful spirits and therefore unfit for human

developers, and so have other sacred places to make roads and room for other modern amenities - ripped by the ineluctable forces of civilization, so to say. The ambiguity caused by these forces of modernity, and the fact that the notion of 'belief' is alien among the Meru, became manifest when some of the individuals who have converted to Islam were asked to say what their beliefs were before their conversion. It was clearly difficult for many of them to identify precisely what their beliefs were. To many people, the idea of God has little to do with belief in the efficacy of curses⁶⁹ and the power of witchcraft, for instance. Indeed one can say of the Meru, and perhaps of many other African peoples, the question of belief (in God) does not arise - there is no question of whether one believes or disbelieves.⁷⁰

Life among the Meru for instance, was a unitary system. This means that if, for example, the rain failed, it was known to the society that something must be done to bring the rain and avert possible calamity such

habitation.

⁶⁹ The following case could well illustrate the belief in the efficacy of curses. A Meru man who worked for the first colonial administrator, Edward Butler Horne, as an informer after Horne's arrival in Meru in 1908, earned himself a bad reputation throughout the region. During the course of his service, he converted to Islam. He proved useful for the administration, especially in their relentless determination to root out the secret societies. It was feared that secret societies could lead to civil disobedience and therefore it was deemed necessary to curb their activities, particularly in the northern part of the district. Something of the nature of secret police/agent was hitherto unknown in Meru, and hence a curse was placed on this man by the traditional supreme council of elders, *Njuri*, at its grand meeting held at Miori, a few miles away from Maua. My informants did not know the date when the curse was placed on him, but it was either in the late 1930s or early 1940s. He died in 1957, but recently, his eldest son (though a Muslim) felt the need to appeal to the council to lift the curse on his own behalf and that of the entire family. It was imperative for him to do that especially because he had no son, which was an indication that the curse was beginning to take effect on the family. Therefore, in propitiation, the first son offered a bull to the *Njuri*, in which the collective will and power of the people is embodied. The *Njuri* members went to this man's homestead and blessed the family.

⁷⁰ L. Brenner, 1989:87-9 gives an interesting analysis of the notion of belief in his article on religious discourse in Africa.

as drought. The remedies were known and the relevant steps were taken by the ritual experts without delay - sacrifices were made and surprisingly enough rain would come. Again if an avoidance taboo were breached, the resultant ritual impurity would be removed through a prescribed process of cleansing of the affected persons, and there were different ways of dealing with different taboos. To the pioneer western scholars such as Evans-Pritchard, such practical solutions, and the value system underpinning their application to situations in daily life, constituted the primitive religions of Africa. These practices, which were initially regarded by western scholars as paganism, are now termed 'African religions', but, Mudimbe argues it should be noted that the reality of Africa has not changed, it is our kind of analysis that has changed.⁷¹

A Case of Witchcraft

As will be illustrated by Nchulubi's case analyzed below, sickness and the fear of witchcraft are important factors of conversion particularly in rural Meru. This is not peculiar to Meru (but clearly it is very much more widespread; it has been observed among the Digo and the Giriama of the Kenya's coast) sickness and spirit possession were significant factors of conversion. Among the Digo, Islam became associated with more efficacious supernatural powers than the traditional methods of dealing with the phenomenon of spirit possession. Therefore when a person was afflicted with spirit possession, he was diagnosed as having "an Arab's devil" whose only cure was conversion to Islam.⁷² Similarly, Parkin observed that among the Giriama,

⁷¹ Y. Mudimbe, Public Lecture, S.O.A.S. 21/5/93.

⁷² D. C. Sperling, 1970:9-10.

in some cases of spirit possession, divination, and cure, there is acceptance of the superior ritual efficacy of Islam among a people who have persistently rejected formal widespread conversion.⁷³

Both Parkin and Sperling attribute the preference for the Muslim resource over the traditional means of dealing with spirit possession to what they see as the superiority of Islamic ritual over the traditional means of dealing with the supernatural. This view can be challenged on the basis of later studies⁷⁴ which show that contrary to the classical view that Islam was accommodated by the traditional African cultures, these cultures invested the new religion with its African identity, and today one can even speak of the many Islamic identities in Africa. What both Parkin and Sperling see as superiority of Islam over traditional cultures of the Digo and Giriama, can also be seen as attraction to the novelty of the Muslim resource rather than its superiority over the traditional ritual. However, incidents of spirit possession are not reported by Meru informants, but even with a few examples, it is not difficult to confirm Lewis' suggestion that:

The appeal of Muslim therapeutic techniques and indeed of Islam itself as a mystical defence system has... been underestimated in analyzing the spread of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa.⁷⁵

Below, I shall examine a typical case of a recent sickness-related conversion of a non-Christian to Islam in which the fear of infliction of harm by adversaries is an equally important factor. Nchulubi has been a Muslim for the last five years, since 1986. In the following extract from a lengthy interview, she narrates the circumstances leading to her conversion:

⁷³ D. Parkin, 1970:224-225.

⁷⁴ L. Sanneh, (1985) for instance shows that Islam was not merely accommodated in Africa.

⁷⁵ I. M. Lewis, 1986:98.

My daughter, I do not know why you want to know my life history, it is a sad one. But if you really want to know, I will tell you what happened to me. I was married to M'Akairi and lived with him for many years in Thitha as you can see I am not a young girl. Anyway, you want to know how I became a Muslim, so I will talk about that. While at Thitha, I did not come into contact with Islam - it was only M'Ibuuri and Asuman and their families who were Muslims in that place... after my third son was circumcised, my husband was bewitched by a jealous neighbour with whom my family had a strained relationship. So he began to roam around the village and finally he became completely mad. I took him to a well known diviner who confirmed that the neighbour was responsible for what was happening to him. So we moved away to another place where we had a piece of land and my husband began to show signs of recovery, only to relapse after a few months. This time, his brothers insisted on taking him to Mathari mental hospital in Nairobi, he spent three months. When he was discharged from the hospital, he looked well recovered. But you know that the medicine given in the hospitals is hopeless if the victim is bewitched - so no sooner had he shown signs of recovery than he relapsed again and before we could do anything, he passed away.

After that, I thought the best thing to do for the safety of my children, was to go back to my parents and stay there. But believe it or not, my enemy had not given up - my eldest son also became mad within a year of settling at my parents' place. It left no doubt now that somebody was determined to destroy us and perhaps wipe out the whole family. At that point, I had to do something, and so I went to see a sheikh. The sheikh said that he could treat my son and after a month of careful treatment at the sheikh's home, the boy was well again. All the same, the enemy had not been defeated and in all probability, he might strike again. So the sheikh said that my children and I could be protected against the power of those intent on harming us, if we converted to Islam. So we 'took' *Asaatu* (the *shahada* or confession of faith). Since then, I have not been troubled again and my children are doing well. Of course those people (the neighbour) are *washenzi* and they are powerless against us. (But they have caused you a great deal of trouble before, why do you think that you are not vulnerable any more? I asked.) The sheikh 'read the book' and assured me that I am now protected. I believe that now their power is weakened.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Interview with Nchulubi, Kiengu market, 1st August 1991.

The Meru construction of witchcraft is given in chapter 3. Recognizing and dealing with it is a personal as well as a social affair. As in Brantley's observation, "wherever the belief in witchcraft permeated an African society, fear prevailed and people demanded protection and control".⁷⁷ Among the Meru as well as among other societies, sickness, and especially the more intractable type like madness, is attributed to evil machinations of others who may themselves be witches or seek the services of witches and/or sorcerers to inflict harm on their victims. In this case, Nchulubi finds the explanation for her husband's suffering in her neighbour's envy and desire to exact revenge. Beckerleg has shown that envy can provide strong motivation for injuring others through the agency of witchcraft.⁷⁸ Nchulubi holds the belief that the western-trained doctor has little knowledge and skill to deal with victims of witchcraft, so she first takes her husband to a traditional medical practitioner, whom she believes has not only the necessary skill, but also the power to counter that of the witch. That her husband relapses after 3 months' treatment at Mathari psychiatric hospital, is itself a testimony to the inadequacy of modern medicine in dealing with witchcraft. Mutungi testifies that:

It is not uncommon... for patients who are convinced that they have been bewitched, to be discharged from the hospital with a prescription first to consult a native medicineman. And it has worked.⁷⁹

Similarly, in this case, it is interesting to note that the lapses into madness are attributed to the determination of the enemy, without the faintest idea that irregularity in the administration of the prescribed medication may be a more plausible explanation. The first two alternatives,

⁷⁷ C. Brantley, 1979:112.

⁷⁸ S. Beckerleg, 1990:227.

⁷⁹ O. K. Mutungi, 1977:xvii.

namely, moving to a different place and seeking modern hospital treatment, did not yield much help and she lost her husband.

Even after moving to her parents' place, the jealous neighbour is not deterred and the threat of the whole family being wiped out looms large in her mind. It is imperative that the power of this apparently inescapable evil be countered with commensurate force. Conversion to Islam provides this force. The preference for the sheikh to the church minister, is predicated on the popular notion that Muslim magic is superior to Meru traditional magic. Besides, the church minister is most likely to dismiss it as the work of the devil without offering any help. Muslim magic derives its greater potency from "reading" of the book' (Quran) written in a strange language, Arabic.⁸⁰ The sheikh's "reading" of the book can be equally to help and to harm, for Nchulubi it provides the necessary reassurance. Thus the "reading" can be equally to help, and to harm - the Gahazi factor again.

This notion of "reading" to harm is expressed in everyday conversation - it is not uncommon to hear that: "...if you do that to me, I will go to the Waswahili", meaning, I will have the book "read for you", and the unfinished part of the sentence is "you will have only yourself to blame for the consequences if you push me that far". It is also a common remark that "it is not for nothing that s/he is behaving in a strange manner, s/he has been read for", meaning that the person concerned is a victim of a sheikh's reading of the book. The reading is said to be particularly efficacious in cases of stealing, cheating and intent to harm others. It is a widespread belief that once the reading has been done, the victim will either die or become demented. The 'reading' is interpreted within the Meru understanding of curse,⁸¹ which has the potency to incur inevitable

⁸⁰ The power of the written word is discussed in chapter 2, p. 98.

⁸¹ See chapter 2 (pp. 111-114) for the explanation of the diffuse working of a curse. It is passed on from one generation to another.

misfortune. In this light, when the reading is done, Nchulubi is assured that not only the intended harm by the neighbour is averted, in addition, the reading is retributive. In a sense, the reading reverses their roles - the tormenter is turned into the victim and the victim the victor. It is important to point out here that this is not the 'Islam' of *Tabligh* - Nchulubi did not seek the help of one of the *Tabligh* Amiri. This particular sheikh she went to was renowned for his magical powers and efficacy of his 'reading'. It is such ideas and practices of popular Islam that the *Tabligh* teachers were quick to condemn as unislamic, though this does not mean that the practices were dropped altogether.

Nchulubi displayed considerable faith in the protection that Islam can provide to her family. Her quest for protection was not in the least half-hearted, hence her quest for Islam was largely a quest for protection. In spite of her limited knowledge of Islam (if at all) she resorted to it for protection. She could feel an almost tangible protection in the power of a book written in a language she could not understand. This sense of protection is concretized by the amulet that is given to her by the sheikh. She was also given some other protective charm to keep somewhere in her house.

Nzibo in his description of the cultural elements found among the residents of the early Muslim settlements in Nairobi, says that:

The practice of wearing amulets was by the end of the 1950s largely abandoned and replaced by picture frames containing verses of the Quran.⁸²

What Nzibo calls an abandonment of amulets can, in the contrary, be seen as a change from amulets being held on the person to being hanged in the wall. The written charm as Goody notes, "is considered so effective because

⁸² Y. A. Nzibo, 1986:145.

it gives speech concrete embodiment",⁸³ therefore the picture frame with Quranic inscriptions on it essentially serves the same purpose as the protective charm tied around the wrist or waist. These too, contain Quranic verses. Thus it is a change from one form of amulet to a more socially acceptable one, perhaps also as status symbol to reflect a changing (or progressive) Muslim society. It should also be pointed out that even this change, after 1950 as Nzibo suggests, was not universal for all Muslim communities. In some of the homes that I visited, I observed a wide use of protective amulets especially for young children, aged between 6 months and 5 years. Indeed in one homestead, the small children wore their protective amulets, *hirizi*, while in a corner of the wall of a large room which served as the living-room and a bed-room, stood a fairly large picture frame with Quranic inscriptions on it. When I enquired about it, I learnt that it had been there for the last 30 years. Even non-Muslims take their children to the sheikh to have these amulets made for them. The contents of the amulets remain secret from its wearer, for it is believed that opening it and disclosing its essence, does not only deprive it of its potency and render it ineffective, but worse still, such profane behaviour (for that is what it amounts to) would surely incur a misfortune. While in ordinary circumstances, the amulet provides protection, for instance, against the evil eye, for Nchulubi it guarantees Muslim protection against the power of her enemies, whom she now regards as *washenzi*.

In a sense, the protective charm that Nchulubi is given by the sheikh to keep somewhere in her house is reminiscent of the Meru traditional protective symbol known as *ikanda* in Kimeru, kept at the entrance of a homestead to ward off evil.⁸⁴ Nchulubi's limited knowledge of the diffuse

⁸³ J. Goody, 1968:227.

⁸⁴ It was a common practice among the Meru to place *ikanda* on top corner of the gate in the belief that if any one in possession of witchcraft tried to enter through the homestead, they would either be deterred or their power debilitated. The contents of *ikanda* are unknown to the rest of the people as it belongs to the

working of the amulet is informed by the traditional understanding of magical protection; except in this case, Islam lends greater power and potency to *hirizi*.⁸⁵ Simmons in his study of conversion in Tonghia, a Senegalese village, West Africa, posited the occurrence of conversion as both continuous and discontinuous. Though the intervening variables are different in Tonghia from what they are in Meru, Simmons hypothesis is nevertheless instructive in Nchulubi's case. It can be seen as a case of conversion at non-symbolic level since there is no actual change of the convert's "mode of attachment to sacred symbols or replacement of one set of symbols by another".⁸⁶ Though *ikanda* is replaced by *hirizi* and Nchulubi feels secure, to her it is the same object of protection, the only difference between the two being the sources from where they draw their potency - one traditional Meru, and the other Muslim.

Be that as it may, the pertinent question regarding Nchulubi's understanding of Islam comes to the fore. Understanding Nchulubi's perception of Islam entails an examination of the ways and means by which she, and others like her, seek to organize their religious observance. In other words, their perception of the priorities of religious behaviour. The first day of our meeting was a Friday, she had walked a distance of five miles to come to the Markaz at Kiengu. She makes this trip every fortnight on the understanding that if she cannot read for herself, she "can listen to those who can read", as she put it. Without knowledge of Arabic, it is difficult for the women (and others) to verbalize the refrain after the Imam's benediction. On this occasion, while the prayers were in progress, Nyanya Fatuma (of whom previous mention has been made) kept urging the women to observe the correct posture. When I asked her why this was so,

domain of the medicinemen.

⁸⁵ The use of Islamic *hiriz* is not peculiar to East Africa, saphy or safi is the Mandingo word for the written charm, J. Goody, 1968:201.

⁸⁶ W. S. Simmons, 1979:303.

she seized the opportunity to describe what she regarded as an "appalling state of ignorance of the local Muslim women". However, one point was clearly emphasized - that regardless of this, they were 'Muslim'. They had 'taken *Asaatu*' (*shahada*) and they observed the distinction between *halal* and *haram* meat.

In their perception of propriety of religious duties and obligations, this single observance is of utmost significance. For Nchulubi and many others like her, Muslim identity is otherwise manifested through the Friday mosque trip; an occasional visit to the area by a prominent religious leader; and the annual Muslim festivals⁸⁷ which bring together all the faithful at the Markaz. At home she is surrounded by neighbours and friends, but she believes that, having taken the *shahada*, she is different from them. Her relatives see her as a *Muthoiri*, (a Swahili) a label usually appended not only to local converts, but to Muslims in general. But she does not see herself as such, partly because of the pejorative connotations of such an appellation particularly outside the social network of Majengo and partly because she has not undergone an acculturation process that was an integral part of conversion during the early days. Though Nchulubi's conversion was not directly linked with the Tabligh activities, one of the striking features of the *Tabligh*-borne conversion in this area, is that it is devoid of Swahili-Islamic acculturation, hitherto regarded as an integral part of the conversion process. As I have said above, the emphasis on direct unmediated (by the sheikh) contact furnishes the basis for the *Tabligh* message of conversion to Islam, a message which in principle disregards cultural transformation and focuses largely on acceptance/profession of the faith.

⁸⁷ Ramadhan is particularly important, it is the time when Muslims all over the world fast and abstain in many ways and after the fasting, celebrations are held. I observed that in this remote Kiengu area, the celebrations had the connotations of a public holiday and even for those Muslims that did not observe the fast, it was the time to feel one with the Muslim Ummah. Guests came from as far as Pakistan and gifts and food were distributed to a large congregation.

Many details are generally inaccessible to the majority of the converts. For instance, I knew a teacher at one of the small mosques who held religious instruction sessions once a week at the mosque for a group of 8 men. There was no woman attending these sessions, neither was there a facility for them to be instructed by a female teacher, if the reason for their conspicuous absence was the prescribed observance of the segregation of sexes. When I enquired what was being done about the women, the teacher said that, even for the men attending the sessions, it was unnecessary to go into many details about the teachings of Islam. Too many details might be an encumbrance to the converts who are apparently 'tottering', so to say, from a condition of unbelief to belief, that is from *ushenzi* to *dini*.

Competing Identities: the Muslim Dilemma

"...if one can be a 'practicing Muslim', one can, by implication, be a 'non-practicing Muslim': one who drinks alcoholic beverages, who does not pray regularly or observe the fast of Ramadhan, and so forth".⁸⁸ There are many kinds of Muslims. The way in which this identity is translated in terms of religious observance in the area in question, furnishes the distinction between the two categories that I have differentiated above; namely, it sets apart the believers from the others or *washenzi*. To the Muslims themselves, the dichotomy is significant and hence in the process of translating it into practical terms, the Muslims in the rural areas have found themselves in a dilemma, an identity crisis.

A basic element of my interpretation of this dilemma constitutes, in the main, an examination of the projection of self-image of Muslims and what others make of this image. Launay has shown that, in Koko, where Islam is much more deeply entrenched than it is in Meru, they have a

⁸⁸ R. Launay, 1992:125.

legalistic conception of Islamic identity, with specific focus on prayer... non-Muslims were (for most part) those who continued to initiate themselves in the sacred forests, to drink and sacrifice to fetishes.⁸⁹

In Meru where Islam is a relatively recent phenomenon, such a line of demarcation is difficult to draw. For the Muslims, it entails the idiosyncratic struggle between *dini* and *ushenzi*, which, as I have shown in the preceding chapters, is one of the most salient features of Islam in Meru.

First, I will present the paradox as I see it: on the one hand, it is *de rigueur* for Muslims to differentiate themselves from *washenzi*. For the pioneers, the adoption of Swahili Islamic cultural elements after conversion readily furnished a means to this end. As a result, the images of Muslim men wearing long shirts (*kanzu*), sandals and embroidered caps; and women wearing ankle-length dresses and head-scarves,⁹⁰ became stereotyped. This stereotyped notion of Muslim demeanor demands tangible or external signs of compliance. For one to be regarded as a 'good Muslim', the mode of dress, for instance, is often enough an indication of the degree of piety as well as a Muslim logo. One Ntomariu told me that "the *kanzu* is the uniform for a Muslim" and an Amiri said that

the turban is important for Muslim because it is regarded as the crown of the prophet. One must cover one's head before going to the toilet because it is the abode of demons, both male and female. Also a man must cover his head in the presence of women, an uncovered head amounts to indecent exposure.⁹¹

⁸⁹ R. Launay, 1992:75.

⁹⁰ Reference to what has come to be regarded as the traditional attire for Muslim women, a long (usually) black gown, *buibui*, is made chapter 1, p. 36 (footnote 32).

⁹¹ Interview with Aslam, Amaku, 11th October 1991.

Underlying this variety of reasons for the use of cap or turban, is the significance attached to appropriate projection of oneself as a Muslim. On the other hand, as I have shown in an earlier chapter,⁹² from the start Muslims in general commanded little respect from the majority of the Meru people, first because they were 'Swahili', people well known in the interior for their proficiency in the use of one sort of magic or another.⁹³ Muslims in Meru therefore, were and still are, generally associated with manipulative magic. Second, they themselves deliberately enhanced this notion by making ostentatious displays of somewhat strange paraphernalia. Also some people in Meru convert to promote their own illegitimate power; they manage to play up their reputation as men who possess supernatural powers. Similarly, in Watamu on the coast, "self-proclaimed involvement in *Uganga* is a standard means to promote one's power and to intimidate others"⁹⁴ except that in Meru an ostentatious claim to Islam is in and of itself an adequate means to this end. The use of this manipulative magic nevertheless is much sought after for well-intended use as treatment of peculiar illnesses such as barrenness and madness, or for retribution or for revenge. As a result, sheikhs and certain other individuals who claim to possess the necessary skills are consulted and this in turn enhances their social standing. Occasionally even individual Muslims without any knowledge of the use of magic are able to harness the local people's fear of it for their own good. The following potato theft case can well illustrate this point: Mwanaidi had a piece of farmland in Ruiru (one of the new farming scheme areas) approximately seven miles from Meru town. She cultivated the land and grew potatoes, but for two consecutive harvests, all the potatoes were stolen. She had this to say:

⁹² For a fuller account of the association of Islam and witchcraft by the local people, see chapter 2, pp. 96-100.

⁹³ K. Hock (1987) has given a full account on Swahili Islam and magic. The English summary of this book, which is written in Germany, shows that he has devoted most of it to the discussion on Swahili magical practices.

⁹⁴ S. Beckerleg, 1990:208.

On the third occasion, I harvested the potatoes and left 7 sackfuls in a store in the farm and went back to town to hire a truck to transport them. When I returned the next day, I found the potatoes were gone. All along, I had suspected the family living nearby was responsible for the recurrent theft, so since I know many people believe that Muslim magic is more powerful than Meru magic, and are afraid of it, I took a piece of white paper and using pieces of charcoal, made some signs on it. I cannot read or write but I knew that they too could not read Arabic, so I made signs which I thought looked like Arabic characters and placed the paper strategically for all to see. When I returned two days later, I was approached by the neighbour who confessed that her son had stolen the potatoes and sold them. She promised to pay compensation within one week because she now feared that her son had been affected by the Swahili magic that I had left behind. She said that he was already beginning to look confused, which she thought was a sign of mental disorder as a result of the recurrent theft of my potatoes. She said that she had warned him against stealing them because it was well known that the owner is a *muthoiri*, a Muslim.⁹⁵

From others' point of view being Muslim is synonymous with 'Swalihiness'. The Muslims do not see themselves as such, and in fact detest the appellation because of its pejorative connotations. Many of my informants took great care to explain that they are 'Muslim' and not 'Swahili'. Generally it is detestable to be identified as practitioner of deleterious^{magic}, but at another level, the same notion is turned by Mwanaidi into an asset. Her bold notice written in a strange (supposedly magical) language was to her intended audience, a confirmation of what is usually suspected of Muslims. Since she was also aware that this suspicion looms large in the minds of many people, by manipulating the idea that as a Muslim she was liable to resort to the use of a deleterious magic, she was able to recover the lost property. For her, it was the utility of this suspicion in the circumstances that mattered, and not its implications to the rest of the people.

For the recent (after 1980) *Tabligh* converts, these occasional ostentatious displays of Swahili-Islamic magic add another dimension to

⁹⁵ Interview with Mwanaidi, Mjini, 20th November 1991.

their identity crisis. The paradox is that on the one hand, they must identify as Muslims; and on the other, such an identification automatically places them squarely in the category of people like Mwanaidi who openly admit that they are users of manipulative magic. The situation is complicated further by a normative rule enshrined in the local custom that reinforces the undesirability of standing out among others, which causes a psychological conflict for a new convert living amid non-Muslim neighbours and friends in the rural area outside the Majengo social network.

As a result, many of them, especially women, find it difficult to strike a compromise between the desirability of sustaining a conspicuously Muslim identity, and the absolute indispensability of good social standing, devoid of the negative connotations that attend such an identity. For instance, I observed that some women, in order to avoid being recognized as Muslims and therefore branded Swahili (*Athoiri* sing. *Muthoiri*) as they walk to the mosque on Fridays, fold their long dresses⁹⁶ up to make them look shorter, and therefore not unfamiliar or different from those worn by other women, until they approach the mosque. The multicolored cotton pieces of cloth, *leso*, used particularly by Swahili women are also folded and hidden in the bags, only to be used for covering one's head when they reach the mosque. Before they enter the mosque compound, the women unfold their dresses to full length and cover their heads with their *leso*. When I enquired from one woman the reasons for doing this, she described what she termed an "uneasy feeling if people started whispering whenever" she walked around in her "religious dress".

⁹⁶ It has become common practice for a prominent local Asian Muslim to distribute long dresses and *leso* to the Muslim women in Igembe. Hundreds of these dresses are distributed once every year. Many of my informants who receive these clothes refer to them as 'religious clothes' to be worn when going to the mosque. The chairman of the committee that oversees the distribution explained that some of the women converts may attribute their failure to attend the mosque to lack of the "recommended" form of attire, and for that reason, procurement and distribution of blankets, *leso* and dresses free of charge became an important part of *sadaq*.

Their dilemma can be elaborated by examining the case of Asha, Hisham's youngest wife. I came to know Hisham, a pioneer who goes to the mosque five times every day. On several occasions, I found that he was the only one praying in a large mosque. This man has earned a reputation in the neighbourhood for regular prayer. Regularity of prayer (though itself an obligation) is traditionally regarded as an observable sign of compliance. Just as spittle in Koko is "turned into a tangible" sign that one is observing the fast during Ramadhan,⁹⁷ the facial mark which develops as a result of prostrating during prayer, is regarded by local Muslims as a sign of piety, of *Swalihina*, those who pray regularly. In indeed, some people go to great lengths to acquire this facial mark in order have a tangible proof of regular observance of prayer. Regarding the facial mark, Fisher reports that:

There is one reference in the Quran to the facial mark of prostration... and this passage is one of the very few which acknowledge that such a mark in particular, or *sujud* more generally is not exclusively Muslim.⁹⁸

When I visited Hisham's homestead, he complained about his youngest wife and asked me whether I could "see any signs of *dini* in her". When I asked him what he meant by "signs", I was faced with a barrage of criticism of "the manner in which she projects herself, not least to her non-Muslim women associates; her mode of dress little reflects the prescribed standards of modesty".⁹⁹ In his opinion, a Muslim should be "recognizable" from others. Her response to this was:

It is difficult for rural women who have to subsist on working in the fields, to fulfil all the obligations, for instance, if one spends long hours in the field, it is difficult for one to observe the five prayers.

⁹⁷ R. Launay, 1992:117.

⁹⁸ See H. Fisher, 1993:17.

⁹⁹ Interview with Hisham and Asha, Lare, 10th october 1991.

Even if one can pray anywhere, you have to understand that the rural woman finds herself in difficult circumstances, unlike the woman in Majengo for instance where one is not ridiculed for wearing different clothes or for being seen with a jug of water for ablution.

To Asha, these are inextricable circumstances - she is aware of what is expected of her as a Muslim, but the social implications are too much to bear. She is worried about the Muslim stereotype and the practicalities of farm work and the banter of other women. Thus the paradox becomes manifest as the Muslims are caught at a crossroads, trying to meet the criteria of the stereotyped Muslim identity (that a Muslim should be recognizable, even at a glance); and at the same time eschew the similarly stereotyped notion of 'Swahiliness' and the negative expressions that attend to it in this area. It emerges therefore that there is an implicit contradiction in trying to keep the two identities: on the one hand, being Muslim with its inexorable demand on the individual believer to distinguish herself/himself from *washenzi*; and on the other, to be part of the local social network, which makes no less demands on the individual as a participant. In other words, to confine oneself within the parameters of the two conflicting identities.

Conclusion

Prior to 1980, few Muslim families were found in the rural areas. Most of those living in trade centres were traders (see Chapter 1) and hence there was little social interaction between them and the wider majority of the people. Without suggesting that these few Muslims were isolated, it is necessary to point out that their urban social life was not in the least intertwined with that of the village. For instance they did not have to participate in the circumcision ceremonies; go to the neighbours to 'borrow' fire or salt. Thus in a sense they remained aloof and isolated. But since 1980, thanks to ^{the} *Tabligh*-borne wave, Islam has spread in the rural areas,

with the result that a handful of families or individuals are now found in the villages in many parts of Meru. What is significant for our purpose is that the *Tabligh*-borne conversion that I have described above shows a tendency to disregard the hitherto important cultural dimension of the process of conversion.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONVERSION IN THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

The Progression of Islam in Meru

Conceptually, the development of Islam in Meru can be divided into three phases. The initial phase was the arrival of Muslims and the formation of Muslim communities in what is now Meru town. During this phase which lasted from 1910 to the mid 1950s, peoples of diverse social-cultural backgrounds who accompanied the colonial administrators as porters, soldiers in the King's African Rifles (K.A.R.), police, workers and traders, together with the returning *mahaji* formed Muslim communities with clearly defined social boundaries.

Islam provided the basis for the formation of these communities which were mirrored on the coastal Swahili society. The appropriation of Islam in Meru was attained through the re-enactment of the coastal social stratification, a stratification based on the notion of inequality between *waungwana* and non-*waungwana* classes. In this coastal meta-cosmology, urbanity and 'civilization' were the prerogative of the *waungwana* and the people from the interior were seen as *washenzi*, that is 'uncivilized'. These concepts were transported to Meru in a 'fossilized' form by the Nyamwezi, Manyema, Wadigo, Wangaziya, and many other diverse peoples who formed the group that identified itself as the Swahili in Meru.

By re-enacting the social divisions of the coastal society, Muslim groups in Meru were able to create and sustain separate identities. Distinctions such as had been maintained between *waungwana* and *washenzi* in the coastal traditional society were now reinvented in a different cultural milieu and applied between Muslims and non-Muslims; and the inequality such as that existing between *Waungwana* and non-

Waungwana (people of slave descent, for instance) was maintained between those "born in the Muslim faith" and the converts, *mahaji*. In spite of the process of acculturation that the *mahaji* espoused in their effort to emulate the Swahili who were seen as the standard bearers of the faith, the two groups of Muslims could not be seen to be equal. Thus Islam was used to create and sustain separate identities throughout this phase.

The cultural dimension of Islam represented as *dini*, was emphasized as the Muslims endeavoured to mark themselves off from the majority of the non-Muslim Meru people. To be seen to be Muslim gained a great deal of significance and such external signs of compliance as "Muslim dress" became important to the wearer as a mark of identity. Thus Muslims dressed in a different way, prepared different types of food and even spoke a different language (Kiswahili) from the rest of the Meru people who were monolingual and spoke only Kimeru. The Muslims saw themselves as "*dini* people", where *dini* exemplified the cultural dimension of Swahili-Islam, the Arabic Quran being inaccessible except to a few individuals. In these circumstances, Islam became mystified and the reaction of the rest of the Meru people to the Muslim presence throughout this period was something like "we have our own ways, keep *dini* to yourselves".

The second phase was ushered in by the *Mau Mau* cataclysm of the early 1950s and lasted through the 1960s. The outburst of nationalism and the escalating independence struggle shook the Muslims; they realized that their survival as a community in the face of the sweeping social changes depended a great deal on the notion of a common Muslim community identity. The demolition of the old Swahili village in 1954/55 marks the turning point - the Swahili and the Nubians were put together and the threat of the *Mau Mau* movement became a reality to the Muslims. These events triggered a chain reaction: the *mahaji* expressed sympathy for the nationalist cause through the *Jumuia-tu-Baladia* society; and the future was bleak for those who still clung to the notion of a separate identity for

a small minority of foreigners based on the putative superiority of those born in the faith over converts. Such people as the Nubians could no longer rely on the patronage of the colonial administration to which they had rendered a loyal service, for which they had been treated favourably.

A new basis for re-orientation of attitudes had to be found in order for the Muslim groups to obliterate the distinctions that had kept them apart, dissolve their separate group identities and move towards a common Muslim community identity in the face of the influx of non-Muslims into the town. The concept of birth in the faith that had hitherto been used to keep the *mahaji* Muslims apart from the standard bearers of the faith, was now charged with new meaning - it became a unifying factor for all the Muslims in Meru town. The dichotomy between the *mahaji* and others ceased to function as their children were now treated as equals with their cousins, that is the children of both the Swahili and the Nubians, since, as has been illustrated by the case of the two sisters, (Karimi and Kainda) marriage in either group determined the status of the Meru women married to Muslims. They were seen as either *mahaji* or Swahili, depending on the religious status of their husbands.

The first step in the construction of a common Muslim community identity was a new emphasis on unity of all Muslims in Meru. The idea of unity was popularized in the informal gatherings (*baraza*) and emphasized during the Friday sermons in the Jamia mosque. Muslims were encouraged to realize that they had a common destiny in their struggle against *ushenzi*. At the same time there was a new emphasis on identifying oneself as a Muslim by "proclaiming" one's faith. Consequently, external display of piety became greatly significant. Sheikh Said's sermons communicated in no uncertain terms the need for the Muslims to adjust accordingly to the changes taking place in Meru.

The Sheikh's call to the Muslims at that time to promote the doctrinal dimension of *dini* can also be seen as an identification of the local Muslim community with the universal Muslim Ummah.

The third phase begins at the end of the 1970s. It has been characterized by external influence in the form of *Tabligh* and at the same time plagued by the *maulid* controversy. The *maulid* debate has given rise to new trends, for instance, the Majengo Muslim community has been divided into two rival groups: supporters and opponents of *maulid*. The latter are referred to by the *maulid* supporters as "*bid'a* people". *Maulid* has come to serve as a means of expressing a particular identity within the Muslim context in Meru with the result that it has become an important factor in the shifting social alignments within the Muslim community. It has hardened the existing lines of patronage to the extent that now the choice of the mosque for Friday prayer (or even regular prayer for that matter) is largely determined by these social alignments.

Nevertheless, this phase has seen a perceptible growth of Muslim presence in many rural areas in Meru, particularly Igembe. The first *Tabligh* teachers from Tanzania and Pakistan are said to have visited Meru in 1979. *Tabligh*-borne conversion outside the Muslim enclaves in Meru town does not entail a process of acculturation such as was required of *mahaji* during the early period. What is emerging in these rural areas which have been targeted by *Tabligh* activists is a category of Muslims who exhibit no external signs of Swahilization, which was until recently an integral (and sometimes sole) part of the process of Islamization. During the first phase, local converts, after being given the rudimentary instruction on the tenets of Islam, were "taught to be good Muslims", in other words, taught to practice the local variant of the Swahili culture.

It can therefore be said that though Swahili Islam has not been static over the years, *Tabligh* activity has enhanced a process of de-swahilization

of Islam in Meru. Now there are Muslims who cannot even speak Kiswahili, which, during the first and second phases was an important mark of Muslim identity.

Up till recently, the concept of *Mji* (town and now Majengo) and the intricate network of social ties among its residents has served to provide what can be termed the optimal condition for the functioning of Muslims as a community in Meru. Outside the Majengo social environment, the Muslims in their minority status have failed to constitute themselves into a viable community. In these circumstances recent *Tabligh* converts find themselves in a dilemma as they try to maintain a Muslim identity and at the same time retain their places in the non-Muslim social network of the majority of the people around them. This dilemma has been illustrated by the case of the women who either hide their long "Muslim dresses" in their bags until they approach the mosque or fold them up to make them look short like those worn by non-Muslim women so as to avoid being identified as Muslims. There is a paradox in that for most other people, perhaps in Majengo where Muslim community support is available, external display of Muslim identity is necessary and to be seen to be Muslim is important.

Explaining Islam in Meru: A Recapitulation of Horton's Intellectualist Theory

Muslim presence and manifestations in many parts of Africa vary in strength and structure and therefore, any hypothesis that predicts patterns of Muslim behaviour and the trends of Muslim growth, or decline, must recognize the variations that exist and offer a theory sufficiently nuanced to be able to relate the varied mode of Islamization to the African cultural diversity.

One approach which has occupied a prominent place in recent anthropological perspectives of conversion¹ is the intellectualist theory, championed by Robin Horton. Horton's exposition of the intellectualist theory triggered the debate between himself and Humphrey Fisher and elicited much criticism from a cross-section of scholars, whom Horton refers to as members of "the devout opposition".² I do not intend to get entangled in this complex debate and therefore, reference to it will be made in so far as it is relevant^{to} my analysis of the presence and representations of Islam in Meru, that is the establishment of the nucleus Muslim communities in the town and the more recent trends evident in the activities of *Tabligh* and what seem to be the beginnings of a process of 'de-Swahilization' of Islam in rural Meru.

Robin Horton postulates an intellectualist theory, which aims to explain the adaptive potential of the African cosmology prior to the appearance of Islam and Christianity on the scene, and in response, Fisher proposes a three-stage theory which sees Islam as having its own momentum that keeps it on the move in various circumstances. It is Fisher's response (which "had its genesis" in Horton's theory) in which we are mainly interested here, but it is useful, nonetheless, first to state briefly Horton's position.³

¹ See L. R. Rambo, "Current Research on Religious Conversion", *Religious Studies Review*, Vol.8, No.2 April 1982:146.

² For instance see R. W. Wyllie, 1980:81-90, E. Ikenga-Metuh, 1987:13-25, P.B. Clarke, 1987:136-141 and 1988:183-187.

³ H. Fisher 1973:27. I use the term intellectualist because Horton himself applies it to his theory of how African societies sought to explain, predict and control ideational change, R. Horton, 1971:100. For a definition of the intellectualist theory "which has its roots in the 19th century", see E. T. Lawson and R. N. McCauley, 1990:33-37.

Horton begins with the premise that to the African the concept of the Supreme Being is not an "addition" either by the Christian missionary or the Muslim teacher; rather, at conversion, the African accepts change and development in his concept of the Supreme Being.⁴ This, Horton sees as the foundation of his intellectualist theory of conversion, in which he supposes that there was a situation before the advent of both Islam and Christianity, when the African traditional beliefs began to undergo changes. He therefore suggests that:

acceptance of Islam and Christianity is due as much to development of traditional cosmology in response to other features of the modern situation as it is to the activities of the missionaries.⁵

Thus, Islam and Christianity were accepted only "where they happen to coincide with the responses of traditional cosmology to other... factors of the modern situation".⁶ In places where there was no such coincidence, the influence of the world religions (of Islam for our purpose) was "weakly developed or absent".⁷

Horton sees religion as a system of theory to explain, predict and control the affairs of everyday life. According to his thesis on how this system of theory functioned among the pre-colonial African societies:

...autonomous communities lived somewhat inward-looking lives. Nonetheless... there was also an awareness of belonging to a wider world and to a wider humanity. Now in such areas, there was in the typical community a two-tiered body of religious theory. On the one hand, this body of theory postulated a set of spiritual guardians of

⁴ R. Horton 1971:100.

⁵ R. Horton, 1971:103.

⁶ Ibid., p.104.

⁷ Ibid., p.104.

the community and a set of spiritual owners of the surrounding wilds. Together these underpinned the life of the local polity. On the other hand, it postulated a supreme being which underpinned the life of humanity as a whole and the existence of the world at large. As the local polity and its environs were part of the wider world, so the lesser spirits were seen as being somehow under the aegis of the supreme being. From these postulates, it followed that an assiduous cult of the lesser spirits would keep the life of the local community on course whilst attention to the supreme being would deal with needs of the individual and of his community *vis-a-vis* the wider world. However, since the life of the local community had priority... the balance of emphasis in religious practice was typically on the cults of the lesser and locally-based spirit forces.⁸

This is to say that when the small-scale African communities, previously insulated by their own environment, were opened up to the outside world during the last decade of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, by the creation of modern means of communication - the railways and the roads - their political, cultural and social-economic boundaries were enlarged, with the result that their religious attention was now focussed on the top tier, that is the Supreme Being, so as to explain, predict and control the circumstances in which they found themselves.

According to Horton's ideas about religious thought in 'theory', though the local community is aware of the wider world and of the forces underpinning the life of the wider humanity, the emphasis is on the locally-based forces that affect the local community. In other words, the network of social ties and vital relationships among the members of a local community are sustained within the family or group. If the social boundaries of such a group are broken and members are no longer enmeshed in these relationships, the orientation towards the supreme being becomes important. Thus the move towards monotheism has to do with a wider social integration.

⁸ R. Horton, 1993:359.

From this perspective, Horton's analysis might apply to the *mahaji's* initial contact with Islam. As I have shown in the thesis, the pioneer *mahaji* in Meru were people who left their traditional communities, either voluntarily as the case of Mzee Ibrahim illustrates,⁹ or through conscription into the army or the compulsory labour which the colonial administrators saw as the only way to force people in Meru to go out to work. Some of these people who went out to work in distant places, found themselves thrust against strangers in what were known as the African locations in many towns, without the communal support that they had enjoyed among their own people. Therefore, conversion to Islam for such people, for instance those who went to work in Nairobi, offered an alternative to the communal social setting from which they had been uprooted by forces of colonialism. For these converts or the *mahaji* as they were known, the members of the Muslim community became one's *jamaa* or family and, as Bujra observed in Nairobi, Islam offered a complete social system owing nothing to the rural models of life, and took no account of the ethnic diversity of the people that came together as members of a Muslim community. Membership to this community

provided a social framework within which people could interrelate on a new basis, it provided an authority structure, it ordered life crises... and it even structured the passing of time with communal celebrations... once having become a Muslim, all other Muslims became one's relatives or *jamaa*.¹⁰

In this sense only, Horton's theory applies to the analysis of the initial contact with Islam, that is the circumstances in which the pioneer *mahaji* became converted into Islam. However, what Horton fails to take into account is that Islam brings with it a specific type of monotheism other than that of the two-tiered African cosmology. An important point for my

⁹ See chapter 1, p. 54.

¹⁰ J. Bujra, 1975:227.

discussion is the acquisition of Muslim identity by the *mahaji* but Horton does not go beyond the initial stage. His analysis does not take us further in understanding the dynamic of Islam in Meru.

Fisher's Tripartite Model of conversion

In his response to Horton's intellectualist theory, Fisher argues that the Africans have the ability to make "Islam their own" and sees Islam as having its own momentum and therefore, does not depend on the adaptability of African traditional beliefs and practices.

Furthermore, Fisher observes that absolute detachment from the traditional beliefs and practices is not possible even after conversion to Islam and a great deal of these practices are carried over. Contrary to the principal idea of the intellectualist theory, he suggests that "for those people who have transferred from microcosm to macrocosm it is the spirit cult rather than the awareness of one God that flourishes".¹¹ On the other hand, changes could be in the form of "encroachment of one microcosm upon another"¹² and not necessarily of macrocosm upon microcosm.

Fisher disagrees with Horton's theory, which gives primacy to changes that the traditional societies were experiencing from within themselves, and attributes the progress of Islam in Africa to the compatibility with these changes. The "main point at issue" between the two scholars, in Fisher's words, is

whether, as Horton believes, the essential patterns of religious development in Black Africa are determined by the enduring influence of a traditional cosmology, which arises anew, like the

¹¹ H. Fisher, 1973:32.

¹² H. Fisher, 1985:158.

phoenix, from the ashes of colonialism and conversion; or as I would argue, a genuine religious transference is possible, unleashing a new force, which is neither quite like any religious expression 'outside' before being transferred in, nor yet the same as anything already 'inside'; and which then, like a juggernaut, advances under its own momentum.¹³

In contrast, therefore, Fisher postulates a three-stage theory:

quarantine, mixing, and reform. In the quarantine stage, the faith is represented by newcomers - traders, perhaps, from North Africa, or refugees, or clerics employed in providing religious services such as prayer and divination for their pagan patrons. Orthodoxy is relatively secure because there are no converts and thus no one to bring into the Muslim community heterodox beliefs and observances drawn from his or her non-Muslim past. In most places, quarantine was not maintained indefinitely, and sooner or later, as local people converted in increasing numbers, the stage of mixing succeeded, in which people combined the profession of Islam, and as it might be, the quite sincere observance of many Islamic tenets, with many pagan rituals. Finally, often after a lapse of centuries, the candle of reform, kept alight by the written word, and perhaps also by the devotion of some clerics who succeed in maintaining an element of quarantine against the mixing all around them, burst into a conflagration and established the rule of the saints.¹⁴

Fisher states that the aim of his discussion is to provide "general principles",¹⁵ whose applicability has to be tested in relation to particular cases, and examples of which, he suggests, could be found in any period. Patrick Ryan in his analysis of the influence of the Muslim cleric in West Africa has given an interesting interpretation of Fisher's model, fitting neatly the development of Islam in four ancient kingdoms into the three stages of quarantine, mixing and reform. Ryan sees the invasion of Ghana

¹³ H. Fisher, 1985:153.

¹⁴ H. Fisher, 1973:31.

¹⁵ H. Fisher, 1985:154.

by the Almoravids in 1076 as the "point of breaking down"¹⁶ of quarantine, though there was some form of social intercourse between Muslims and Traditionalists, marking the beginning of the end of quarantine. He agrees with Fisher that Islam emerged from the quarantine when the cleric made petitionary prayers (which were incidentally successful) for the benefit of the king.¹⁷ The transition to the next stage is marked by the cleric's greater involvement in court affairs, resulting in alliances with the kings.

However, an almost obvious criticism of his theory, is that it may be applicable perhaps only to the process of Islamization in the ancient kingdoms of Ghana and Mali, where Fisher also draws most of his historical evidence for the tenability of his model. This three-stage model fits well such a situation as Ryan is dealing with, but it would have to be reshaped for the analysis of not only the case under study, but much of the interior of East Africa. The major difficulty with this theory, therefore, is not that we can find counter examples, but that it is difficult to show how adequate it is as an explanation for every instance of conversion in Africa. I shall examine each of the crucial elements of the argument.

What is Meant by 'Quarantine'?

The first of Fisher's three-stage theory is designated "quarantine". First, the notion of quarantine evokes in the reader's mind the images of actual isolation of the Muslim newcomers from their hosts to check the 'contagion' of their faith. How does this concept then apply to the case under study? As has been shown in chapter 2, during the first 18 years after the arrival of Muslims in Meru, they formed separate communities in town, geographically separated from the people around them. This geographical separation not only generated the feeling that they were

¹⁶ P. Ryan, 1978:8.

¹⁷ P. Ryan, 1978:17.

different, but also the geographical boundaries hardened the social boundaries between Muslims and others. Except for occasional marriage to local women, there was little interaction between Muslims, particularly the foreigners and the rest of the Meru people. But since complete separation proved impractical, when they came together Muslims kept a distance: for instance, they did not shake hands with non-Muslims (*washenzi*) or eat together. At a glance, therefore, it seems as if the pioneer Muslims in Meru had an idea of quarantine. But I must point out that their idea of quarantine differs significantly from that which Fisher presents in his theory.

Fisher is concerned with the question of faith and the Meru Muslim pioneers were concerned with identity. The dichotomy was between Muslims and *washenzi* and the key factor in their relationship, from the Muslim point of view, was to keep *ushenzi* at bay. It was not faith that they endeavoured to safeguard: for instance, abstaining from eating food prepared by non-Muslims could be justified on the grounds that it might not be *halal*, but there is no theological justification for serving food on banana leaves for a non-Muslim so as not to use utensils used by believers. *Ushenzi* was treated as something contagious and the explanation for this fear of contagion at that time can be found in the urgent need for Muslims to create and sustain a separate identity for themselves. As has been shown by the case of the two sisters separated by marriage into different categories of Muslims, it was not faith, that made them different from each other - both were converts but one acquired a Swahili identity (and therefore higher status) and the other a *mahaji* identity (and a relatively lower status).

A second aspect of Fisher's concept of quarantine is the initial interaction between the pioneer Muslims and others in the form of provision of "religious services" by some of these newcomers for their non-Muslim patrons. This could be seen as a form of social interaction between the two

sides. The notion of quarantine, therefore, seems not only to ignore the phenomenon of therapeutic Muslims, as Parkin prefers to call those who converted to Islam in search of therapy, but also the existence of some form of interaction which facilitated the rendering of the said religious services. That the non-Muslim patrons, in the first place, availed themselves of these services, is an implicit acknowledgement of the efficacy of the Muslim clerics' prayers and divination, though not necessarily of their ascendancy over the traditional religious resources. This recognition, however remote it may appear to be, is nevertheless, a sign of the advancing juggernaut, to borrow this intriguing metaphor from Fisher, upon whom it was initially wished, as a criticism, by Horton.

To carry this idea even further, it may be suggested that the accessibility of religious services on the one hand, and the recognition of the services of the Muslim cleric as an alternative resource can be seen as the first movements of the imperceptible juggernaut in the direction of Black Africa; or put in another way, the meeting point between Islam and the potential convert.

Furthermore, the notion of quarantine neglects the evidence from the East African coast. A brief description of the situation that prevailed in the Swahili towns on the East African coast at the planting of Islam (though the time when Islam came to the coast is still a matter of conjecture as are the "identity and significance" of the first Muslims),¹⁸ might illustrate the inherent difficulty in the notion of a quarantine stage, that of finding a state of affairs that can be correctly defined as quarantine, during which Islam is practiced in a 'pure' form, before it is adulterated at the mixing stage. This difficulty undermines Fisher's three-phase theory.

¹⁸ R. L. Pouwels, 1987:22.

Mark Horton's archaeological work provides us with the most recent information on the origins and development of Swahili-Islamic culture. He proposes the "idea of a Swahili corridor that extended along the East African Coast, linking trading communities of the Island, coast and hinterland." This leads him to conclude that these coastal communities "were not passive recipients of Asiatic culture",¹⁹ living in isolation in their ports - they maintained well developed trade networks, not only among themselves, but also with traders from across the ocean.

To paraphrase Pouwels, over the centuries, the coastal societies had developed an "identifiably 'local'" culture, well adapted to the peculiar coastal ambiance, while at the same time, this very adaptation "presented new opportunities for a broadened world-view through the contacts with non-African cultures which also were part of the coastal world".²⁰ Thus it was the natural environment (the sea) and the whole gamut of social, political and economic activity, rather than any one particular element (except their ability to innovate) that was instrumental in the moulding of a unique coastal civilization. Given this background, when new experiences presented themselves in the form of Islam, the coastal societies easily took them in their stride.²¹

Certainly, coastal Africans were not unprepared for this, since change, even conscious innovation, always had been as much part of their experience as that which was occurring in the twelfth and

¹⁹ Though the development of the Swahili-Islamic coastal culture remains largely unravelled, new archaeological evidence suggests Muslim presence from as early as the 8th century, and this "evidence", as Mark Horton says, "has completely changed our understanding of the Islamisation of the Coast", M. Horton, 1994:17.

²⁰ R. L. Pouwels, 1987:24.

²¹ The Shanga excavation points to Muslim presence from ca.780 and other pieces of evidence suggest "a well organized Islamic Community" by ca. 850-900 (Mark Horton, 1994:19).

thirteenth centuries.... Islam simply was engulfed in this wider historical process which had started well before the twelfth century. So when people began constructing Islamic tombs and mosques, it was not at all surprising that they applied their own architectural styles to them...²²

Given the new archaeological evidence for a much earlier Muslim presence on the coast, Pouwels' dating may be disputable for Islam seems to have arrived at the coast of East Africa much earlier, and according to Allen, it "was grafted onto the local culture". To this, Horton might reply that the development of the long-distance trade between the East African coastal peoples and the lands across the sea, is an illustration of his intellectualist theory - but only in some sense, for it is not known what the religious outlook of pre-Muslim East African coast was. According to Horton, the coastal societies should have been moving towards the Supreme Being.

The adoption of Islam being "part of a more pervasive historical process" in the coastal societies, it is difficult to imagine a stage of quarantine, such as the one proposed above. The picture that both Pouwels and Mark Horton paint of the early Islam²³ on the coast, is not one of a religion of foreigners isolated in their own religious practices, or to borrow Fisher's phrase, living in a "separate world" to which the first converts have to pass and join "their new brothers-in-faith"²⁴. Islam becomes for them just another aspect of the on-going changes, which it seems, they are able not only to adopt, but also to harness for their own purposes. Hence, the speed of the juggernaut here is not the issue; in other words, what is important is not how fast the local people were in adopting the new faith, but rather the idea that Islam was gradually permeating the coastal culture.

²² R. L. Pouwels, 1987:24.

²³ Mark Horton, 1994:15-19. Also see R. L. Pouwel, 1985:201-208, 1987:17-31.

²⁴ H. Fisher, 1973 : 32.

The Problem of the Reality of Unadulterated Orthodoxy

The other crucial element of the quarantine stage is orthodoxy. When I consider the implication of Fisher's explanation of the quarantine stage, that it is the period during which "orthodoxy is safely tucked away in the isolation ward (for that is the image that quarantine brings to mind) before it is adulterated, or contaminated (if I may continue in the spirit of quarantine) while the newly arrived Islam enjoys the absence of "heterodox beliefs and observances drawn from... non-Muslim past"²⁵ the difficulty of explaining assumed purity of Islamic worship that is ascribed to the initial stage, in other words, the reality of orthodoxy as an attribute in itself becomes apparent. Islam itself is inherently diverse, and renders itself open to divergent interpretations of the scriptures; and therefore to ascribe to Islam a monolithic orthodoxy, is, as Lewis points out, to disregard the fact that

the vast corpus of written *hadith* and interpretation is regularly accompanied by the equally extensive *written* apparatus of magical and astrological Islamic lore which is regularly disseminated from urban centres of Muslim excellence. These not only provide an Islamic base and legitimation for pre-Islamic mystical beliefs and rituals but actually sometimes *introduce* these where such 'magical' beliefs did not exist. It is not just oral pre-Islamic culture which dilutes the unswerving eternal truth conserved in literate mainstream Islam, but also elements in literate mainstream Islam which introduce and perpetuate alternative renderings of the Prophet's message.²⁶

We may not agree with Lewis that Islam introduces magical beliefs even where they "did not exist", for a society which does not have any

²⁵ H. Fisher, 1973: 31.

²⁶ I. M. Lewis, 1983: 79-80.

magical beliefs is difficult to find; however, the point for us is to illustrate that even what is termed 'orthodox Islam' is relative. For instance, Hodgson writes of early Islam:

The older religious traditions made their contribution to the spirituality which now took form within Islam...throughout the High Caliphate period this contribution was very important. We have noted that in law and ethics and popular lore, which concerned everyone, both the 'ulama' and the story-tellers of the mosque drew on the dhimmi background for their spirit and often their materials...²⁷

Thus the idea of the purity of orthodoxy or the absence of heterodoxy, even that early, seems rather untenable. A Muslim past does not necessarily imply the absence of heterodoxy. Even before we examine Swahili Islam (and I think it is true for other varieties of Islam) in which examples could be found of many beliefs and practices which have passed through the ages for Islamic ones, we might follow Fisher's example of going as far back in time as the ancient kingdoms of Ghana and Mali to find historical evidence, and suggest that one cannot certainly vouch for the absence of heterodox beliefs among the early Muslims from North Africa, whom Fisher credits with the practice of pure Islam during the quarantine stage.

Pouwels makes an interesting observation that is relevant to this discussion on the notion of orthodoxy. He says that Islam, (defined as a 'prophetic religion' by Nock and others):

has been treated as more virile and active than traditional African religious views which, because they are black religions, suffer from passivity and are less vitally appealing even to the Africans. Also these views have played a subtle part in exaggerated notions concerning orthodoxy. Orthodoxy... sometimes has been associated

²⁷ M. G. S. Hodgson, 1974:307.

with a supposedly purer immigrant Islam which later became adulterated by Africans.²⁸

The theory of quarantine assumes that the foreigners, be they from North Africa or elsewhere, practice a pure form of Islam. There are two major difficulties with this supposition: first, it overlooks the fundamental difference between Islam as it is written in the scriptures and Islam as it is practiced by different peoples, be that in its cradle in the Arabian Peninsula or in a remote place in Meru with a magnificent mosque and a handful of adherents who can hardly say their daily prayers in Arabic. What is being suggested here is that Muslims only make claims to 'pure' practice wherever they are and whatever their form of Islamic worship. Opposition of one group to another, seeing itself as more Islamic than the other, is an important enough reason to make claims to orthodoxy.

The second point follows from the first - for any society to put into practice the tenets of the faith, the tenets must be interpreted within the cultural provisions of that society. It is not a matter of choosing what is 'good' or 'compatible' with Islam and mixing it with the local religious practices (which is equal to unorthodoxy) as the classical view²⁹ suggests, rather, it is a matter of seeing Islam through the eyes of the local community. As I have just shown, Islam for the societies on the East African coast was part of a historical process, in which their 'innovativeness' was of prime importance in creating a unique Swahili-Islamic culture.

The process of transmitting this culture to the peoples far in the interior, whether it occurred before or after the establishment of the colonial rule, does not fit neatly in Fisher's schema. In the case under study, it is

²⁸ R. L. Pouwels, 1978a:202.

²⁹ This view is championed by Trimingham who sees the East African coastal societies as being "largely static" prior to the reinforcement from Arabia (1964:66).

true that the first Muslims were largely foreigners who settled in what came to be known as the *Boma* in Meru and founded the pioneer Muslim communities there. But a situation that can neatly be described as quarantine did not arise for these were very heterogenous Muslim communities comprising individuals who had been converted in various places and circumstances. For instance the group generically termed Swahili comprised such people as Wanyamwezi, Manyema, Wangaziya and others, whose cultural beliefs and practices, as Nzibo observes, had become part of the Swahili-Islamic tradition.³⁰ This tradition was passed on to the *mahaji*, who in turn enriched it with the practices from the Meru culture. The principle of orthodoxy is not useful in explaining this apparently multi-layered Swahili-Islamic culture as, for instance, harnessed by the *mahaji* in their effort to emulate the Swahili and at the same time elevate themselves above their *washenzi* relatives. Their main objective was not the achievement of the correct reading of the Quran, the correct pronunciation of Arabic words during prayer or the observance of the correct posture during prayer. Of prime importance to the *mahaji* was the acquisition of Swahili culture in which *dini* was embodied. Hence the notion of a stage of quarantine when orthodoxy was safely in the hands of foreigners supposedly practicing a purer form of Islam is inapplicable to both the heralders of Islam and the converts in this case.

If quarantine also means the period between the arrival of the foreign Muslims and when the first converts are won, such a gap may not always be there. Again if we take the example of the mission school where the first Christian converts were trained and the mission stations where they sometimes lived, even for these individuals who had to pass to a new world

³⁰ See Y. A. Nzibo, 1985:121. I have shown in chapter 1 that Wanyamwezi, Wasukuma and even Manyema from west of Lake Tanganyika who filtered to the coast and later served in the establishment of colonial rule in various capacities either as porters, servants or soldiers, were regarded as Swahili in the places that they served: for instance, in Meru they were part of the generic Swahili group. For the discussion on the process of Swahilization, see chapters 2 (p. 80).

of their brothers in faith, complete detachment was not practical. If that was so, then one wonders how purity of orthodoxy could have been guaranteed. To go back to the pioneer Muslims in Meru, the majority of the *askaris* were young men, who on settlement intermarried with the local women. Again these women were converted to Islam and indeed they helped to swell the Muslim population.³¹

Also it is not necessarily the case that the bearers of Islam were foreigners or 'outsiders', and Fisher's model does not account fully for fluidity in different places. There were many instances where the nucleus Muslim communities, as I have already mentioned, were founded by individuals returning to their villages from the coast, Nairobi, or N.F.D. in the case of Meru, where they had come into contact with Islam during a long stay away from home or even through a brief encounter with Muslims. It is evident, therefore, that in the first place, there was no 'orthodoxy' either to be maintained by the foreigners and other pioneer Muslims, or to be jeopardized by the new converts. The emergence of the *mahaji* in Meru could well illustrate this point.

Theoretically if we accept the argument that the coastal societies indigenised Islam in the first place, should we then maintain that the faith that they took to the interior was pure orthodoxy during the quarantine stage, before the Meru *mahaji*, for instance, emerged and started the mixing stage? The answer to this may be found in Pouwel's suggestion that coastal Islam

be regarded holistically, that is to say as a totality which includes elements commonly found in African religions, without passing judgement as to the orthodoxy or propriety of such Islam. The key to understanding the African role in these developments lies in

³¹ The high rate of growth of the women population in the *boma* has been alluded to in chapter 1, pp. 31-32.

appreciating that the Islamic tradition had ties of continuity with previous, non-Islamic tradition.³²

This supports my assertion that Muslims only argue about orthodoxy among themselves, as do those scholars who attribute vitality to 'prophetic religions', and passivity to African (or should we term them 'unprophetic?') religions. Similarly, much less is said about unorthodoxy in Christianity (yet it incorporated a whole complex range of Greco-Roman values, not to mention the corollary of Western culture with which it was infused by the missionaries) until it comes to the conversion of African peoples.

Sowing of the Seed: The Beginning of the 'Mixing' Stage?

The second stage of Fisher's theory of analyzing the development of Islam in Africa is what he terms "mixing". It is difficult to distinguish just where quarantine ends and 'mixing' starts. The point of departure between Horton and Fisher is that the one attributes the weakening of the boundaries to factors intrinsic to the cosmology; and the other extrinsic to it: for monotheism to be felt, the "microcosmic boundaries must have begun to weaken".³³ Attraction to and imitation of the outward elements of Islam: prayer, distinct or different mode of dress, etc., are a manifestation of a weakness in the cosmic boundaries. Also the nature of the human condition - its "pains" and "hazards", for which solutions must be sought, sometimes by all means available, paves the way for certain social agents whose attendance inevitably weakens the microcosm.

³² R. L. Pouwels, 1978:203-204.

³³ H. Fisher, 1985:156.

The most outstanding of these examples is the role of healing as an agent of conversion.³⁴ Nchulubi's case³⁵ of witchcraft is a typical example - for Nchulubi, the cure of her son's mental disorder, and protection for the remainder of her family, were the most urgent needs whose fulfillment was found in converting to Islam. For her, Islam provided the much needed protection against the destructive power of witchcraft. These two factors, namely, the inescapable conditions of the human experience, such as the one in which Nchulubi found herself and her family; and the phenomenon of an alternative (Muslim) resource, to which the individual can turn in search of remedies, are equally important in bringing about the weakening of the cosmic boundaries. On this, we are in agreement with Fisher - the lead that he provides for us is

that the Muslim cleric is accessible and is consulted, to that extent the seeds of religious change, of a new cosmology, have been sown.³⁶

This takes us back to the quarantine proposition - in some sense the presence a Muslim cleric at a court of some West African non-Muslim chief or king, could be an illustration of the quarantine proposition, but only in some sense. The presence and accessibility of the Muslim influence in the form of the religious services rendered by the cleric and that the king (his African religious traditional background notwithstanding) enlists these services illustrates the difficulty of making a good case for a 'vacuum' period before the 'seed is sown'. It is to be noted here that Fisher defines 'mixing' from a particular Muslim point of view, it is a Muslim concept, which I would say is specific to West Africa. He applies it as an analytical concept

³⁴ The role of Muslim healing in conversion is well documented, see D.Parkin 1970: *passim*, 1972:40-41 and D.C.Sperling, 1976:70, 1989:126 on the Miji Kenda of Kenyan coast, for instance.

³⁵ Nchulubi's case of witchcraft is discussed in detail in chapter 6 pp. 283-285.

³⁶ H. Fisher, 1985:158.

which becomes tainted, there is a significant weakness in that it becomes an issue only in certain cases. I will elaborate on this point below, but what I want to suggest here is that this stage, which I prefer to designate 'borrowing' rather than 'mixing', starts with the presence of Islam "somewhere within reach"³⁷ of a given society; and that the recognition of the efficacy of the remedies prescribed by the cleric, is a manifestation of the seed that is about to be sown. These remedies become useful additions or supplements, and occasionally even replacements but again this process differs not only from place to place, but also time to time. It can therefore be said that there are no quarantine barriers to be broken for 'borrowing' to begin and even the people themselves do not see it as borrowing.

This line of argument would suggest that 'borrowing' may occur without conversion or even precede it: some individuals might seek the help of the sheikh for a variety of needs, for instance, to improve their businesses, enhance their luck in matters of love, or even for general protection against 'evil eye'.³⁸ Some of these may convert to Islam, some may not. This may be seen as a case of people turning to a particular alternative religious resource (we must remember that the individuals appreciate, or at least are aware of the Muslim resource from which they derive) for their benefit. The search for a different remedy indicates an openness to the possibility of exploring the available alternatives rather than a purposeful 'mixing'.

African traditional perspective is not exclusivistic; it is from a Muslim point of view that to resort to other alternatives can be seen as borrowing. Illustrative of this point is the case of M'Ibuuri described in chapter 6. In

³⁷ H. Fisher, 1985:156.

³⁸ In many places, particularly where Muslim learning is inaccessible, the sheikh or the teacher (often the same individual) usually combines his regular religious duties with divination and treatment of the sick. For more information, see S. Beckerleg (1990:203).

this case, M'Ibuuri, a pioneer Muslim resorted to the traditional *nthenge* oath, which to him (and others) was the most viable solution to his immediate land problem. But from the point of view of his fellow Muslims, he had profaned his faith by taking of the oath whose method of administration they considered to be unislamic (since the goat is struck to death by the person taking the oath). Indeed my informant said that by taking the oath, M'Ibuuri behaved like a *mshrikina*³⁹ (one who associated God with others) which was considered to be worse than a *mshenzi* because a *mshenzi* is an unbeliever for whom the question of *shirk* is irrelevant. In solving one problem, M'Ibuuri created yet another and therefore he had to find a solution. So he approached the sheikh who suggested a cleansing ritual with two other Muslim men in attendance. Paradoxically, the ritual was reminiscent of a traditional Meru cleansing ritual. Thus the case of M'Ibuuri went a full circle from what Fisher's proposition would term 'mixing' to cleansing and back to mixing again. It illustrates that people proffer a cultural explanation to social phenomena and 'mixing' does not exist to the people on the ground or, it exists only for some who are of theological orientation. This explanation is achieved, as Horton suggests, through a theoretical abstraction, through a social projection into the invisible world. In a later work in which he restates his earlier position to answer his critics, Horton sees the African societies as much more open than he originally thought.⁴⁰

³⁹ This is one of the few occasions when my informants made references to the concept of *shirk* in relation to the Meru traditional practices. While in Meru the emphasis has been on the concept of *ushenzi* as opposed to *dini*, the cultural duality that exists among the Mijikenda Muslims is termed *ushirikina*. "Witchcraft, herbal and magical medicine, spirit possession, oath-taking - all conveniently summarized in the term *ushirikina* (broadly, 'superstition' and deriving from an Arabic term, *shirk*, meaning to share other gods with God and so polytheism) as well as by more specific terms - are denounced as anti-Islamic. Yet they are the normal explanatory recourse for most people at some time" (D. J. Parkin 1985:235).

⁴⁰ R. Horton, 1994:316-323.

It is difficult to document an indigenous non-Muslim concept of 'borrowing' or 'mixing' in the traditional society. But then how can these cases of different people who resort to the sheikh for help be explained rationally? As the two cases (of Nchulubi and M'Ibuuri) cited above illustrate, the people try various alternatives that are available to them without recourse to religious beliefs. They are not interested in the structure and knowledge of Islam, theirs is not a search for salvation. They are concerned with the gratification of their immediate needs.

For those who convert at this point, "detachment, even of so rude a kind as enslavement, is rarely absolute";⁴¹ and therefore, 'borrowing' continues progressively as the list of more "useful supplements" grows longer. Once again this undermines Nock's dichotomy between prophetic and non-prophetic religions, and between conversion and adhesion. The one demands that the individual cross from one religious frontier to another, by placing before them a stark choice between salvation and damnation; the other does not presuppose "the taking of a new way of life",⁴² with the result that adherents are left with "one foot on each side of the fence".⁴³ This dichotomy does not stand the test of time, though Islam is a truly prophetic religion, the data presented above shows that converts in Meru were won through what Nock terms adhesion. Again those who seem to an outsider to be sitting on the fence, as has been shown above, have sought Islam earnestly and in their own way hold onto what they understand by it.

⁴¹ H. Fisher, 1973:32.

⁴² A. D. Nock, 1969:7.

⁴³ Ibid., p.7.

Those sitting on the fence are, I suppose, in Fisher's 'mixing' stage, in which the "cumulative impact" keeps the juggernaut on the move,⁴⁴ while the observance of Islam continues together with that of "many pagan survivals".⁴⁵ Thus the two crucial points of this stage are the aggregate effect of Muslim presence among a group of people; and the survival of some of their 'so-called' "pagan survivals". To me, it seems as if we are dealing with two juggernauts here: the Muslim one and the African one! While the latter is presented as the ineluctable victim of the former, its elements resist, rather stubbornly, being blotted out. It is from this point of view that the resilient elements of African cultures are seen as survivals. Lewis comments that:

It is of course generally assumed that elements of belief and practice which are not officially recognized as part of the international orthodoxy represent local survivals from pre-Islamic times.⁴⁶

Whether an international 'orthodoxy' exists or not is another matter. However, if we accept that Islam cannot be practiced in a cultural vacuum in other words, it manifests itself "in the beliefs of living Muslims, who interpret the Quran as they see fit"⁴⁷ and that therefore purity of orthodoxy is untenable and that detachment, such as the one engendered by enslavement, which uproots a people from both their physical and cultural environment, is "rarely absolute",⁴⁸ then the African cultural elements should not be seen as 'survivals'. The interpretation which ascribes a great vitality to Islam and inertia to the African religious beliefs

⁴⁴ H. Fisher, 1985:159.

⁴⁵ H. Fisher, 1973:31.

⁴⁶ I. M. Lewis, 1983:61.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p.79.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p.79.

and practices, fosters the notion of 'survival' of these elements in African Islam. Hence the crucial point that runs implicitly through the definitions of conversion that I have examined in the introduction, is the power of Islam (supposedly irresistible) over the African religious beliefs - Africans are 'mixers' because they retain some of their cultural elements alongside Islam or Christianity, as the case may be.

This is consistent with the emphasis placed on the 'mixed' Islam in Black Africa. Fisher, notwithstanding his recognition of the Africans' ability to "make even rigorous Islam... their own"⁴⁹ sees the period of "mixing" as characterized by "watered-down Muslim presence"⁵⁰ manifesting itself in "prayers, dress, food and so on". An explanation which sees this mode of Islam as "watered-down" overlooks the fact that these external signs of compliance are, to their holders, the most important hallmarks not only of Islam, but also of true or 'good' Muslims. Therefore, the notion of "watered-down Muslim presence" is not justifiable and it leads to further difficulty in devising a gauge for Muslim presence. The case of the Arab Muslim woman living in one of the trade centres in Igembe could well illustrate this point. Being Arab, she considers herself to be a better Muslim than the local converts, and indeed one day she said that one of the local women, named Mariam, had more faith, was a better Muslim than she herself.⁵¹

What the Arab woman meant to emphasize is that the other woman, though a convert, has a strong faith and is a good Muslim. Given the background of the underlying concepts described in chapter 2, such a

⁴⁹ H. Fisher, 1973:27.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p.33.

⁵¹ Samira and her family are the only Arabs now living in this particular trade centre. She said that she prays in the mosque which was built with funds donated by her family members, five times a day. The other woman (the local convert) tries to emulate Samira's example and she leads a pious life. (Interview 10th October 1991).

comparison, from the Arab woman's point of view was quite appropriate. The case of this woman (the convert) who faithfully and sincerely believes in a religion about which she knows little or nothing, and that of Nchulubi (discussed in chapter 6) who similarly earnestly sought protection in Islam, are typical examples of the local Muslim representations, which, from Fisher's point of view, would be termed "watered-down". But is the faith of these two in Islam watered down? This phenomenon is akin to what Fisher fits into Nock's definition of *adhesion*, and not *conversion*, as if it were a matter of fact that conversion of any African people to Islam, should take the conventional form prescribed by Nock, and that the absence of this particular form requires explanation, if not justification. As I have shown in the introduction, conversion of African peoples to Islam has been variously defined and if for instance we accept a definition such as Nock's, that lays emphasis on the "reorientation of the soul" and a "deliberate turning" from the past, we run into a logical difficulty of defining as converts those who have adopted Islam as a result of the process that has been going on in Meru since the beginning of the 1980s. I would therefore argue that these two and many similar cases where an individual or a group accepts Islam and seeks a Muslim identity as opposed to other forms of identity, whether or not they discard the old for the new, are cases of conversion.⁵²

Reform is the third of Fisher's three stages of the development of Islam in Black Africa, examples of which he suggests could be found at any time. In the case of West Africa on which his analysis is based, literacy played an important role first when the answers given by the scholar Al-Maghili to questions set by the emperor of Songhay, Askiya Mohammed were used to justify reform against what was considered to be mixed Islam

⁵² H. Fisher (1991:5-8) has recently pointed out what he sees as Nock's tidy distinction between conversion and adhesion, and the difficulty arising from this distinction, "if the local people stubbornly persist in merely adhering to the conversion-demanding religion".

at the time. Al-Maghili's answers, written about AD 1500 were used once more as the basis for revolution which flowered into the 19th century *jihads* such as the one of Uthman Dan Fodio. According to Fisher, literacy in Africa

has served as a time-bomb of reform ... When the time comes for explosion, this too is a form of conversion, for the concept applies to two distinct crises of religious development: exchanging one faith (or none) for another, and exchanging indifference and dilution for fervency within the same faith.⁵³

From one perspective the anti-*maulid* movement might be termed reform. Theological arguments against the celebration of *maulid* question the religious value of the celebration which, they argue, is more a social function than a form of worship, *ibadah*. Mixing of men and women and the appropriateness of playing *ngoma*, drum, and other musical accompaniment are also questioned by the opponents of *maulid*. To this extent it is a kind of reform, though it is neither the exchange of one faith for another nor the exchange of dilution for fervency that Fisher proposes above. Beneath the theological questions there is the issue of identity and for the majority of the people, it is not the theological arguments that are disputable, but who the personalities supporting the anti-*maulid* campaign are and for what motives. The Asian sector of the community is accused of using fiscal power to force the rest of the 'African' Muslims to abandon their traditions. Thus their motives are not considered to be religious and the fact that the Asians are said to be behind the anti-*maulid* movement, it has triggered a sort of reaction from the *maulid* supporters. The conflict remains unresolved and *maulid* in Meru is considered both joy (*farah*) and obligation (*faradh*) and therefore left to the discretion of the individual believer. Indeed from the point of view of the majority of the people, the controversy is externally instigated for reasons other than religious reform. Therefore an analysis

⁵³ H. Fisher, 1973:36.

that sees *maulid* movement in Meru only in terms of reform fails to take account of this other and perhaps more important dimension to the controversy.

Tabligh activity in Meru is perhaps closer to what Fisher sees as the crisis of exchanging indifference for fervency than the aims of the *maulid* debate are. To all intents and purposes, *Tabligh* at the national level aimed to "draw out the Muslims", *kuzidua watu*, particularly in the rural areas where, leadership and guidance were considered to be lacking. The controversy between Sheikh Shariff and the *Tabligh* protagonist in Igembe can be explained in terms of reform of local Islamic practices. But again the growing tension between the *Tabligh* activists and the local Muslims adds a different dimension to the phenomenon of *Tabligh* in Meru. It points to struggle between two strands of Muslim influence drawing from different sources: the sheikhs from the north, and the active *Tabligh* missions from outside the country. It has also been noted that *Tabligh* activity in this area, has been more a conversion of non-Muslims to Islam than a re-conversion or a "drawing out" of the lax Muslims as was initially stipulated to be the sole aim of *Tabligh*.

Both the *anti-maulid* and the *Tabligh* movements in Meru, have an element of reform but they go in a different direction than that predicted by the three-stage theory that sees Islam in Africa as progressing from a period of quarantine, when orthodoxy is still tucked away safely before the local people enter Islam bringing with them 'heterodox' practices which lead on to a mixing stage, a stage that is brought to an end by an "explosion" of reform.

Concluding Remarks: Conversion, Adhesion or De-Swahilizing Islam?

One strand of Fisher's argument emphasizes the importance of the Muslim cumulative impact, hence the consistency of Muslim witness, which he suggests, builds up a "decisive advantage".⁵⁴ The notion of 'birth in the faith' and the re-orientation of the Muslim community in both Majengo and Mjini enclaves within Meru municipality that I have discussed in chapter 5, can be compared to the Muslim cumulative impact.

At the first level are the pioneer *mahaji*, who, as has been shown in chapter 2, were converted in different places and returned to Meru and founded the Majengo Muslim community. Of prime importance at this initial stage, was the distinction between themselves as Muslims and their non-Muslim relatives, whom they considered to be *washenzi* (uncivilized), a 'fossilized' notion of the coastal dyad of 'civilization' (Muslim/town) versus savage/bush. The 'Swahili' disdain for the *mahaji* forced them to espouse their own identity as *mahaji*.

Their descendants (at the second level) were considered to possess a higher religious status than their parents and therefore equal to their cousins (the descendants of the Swahili group), since they had been born into the faith and not converted.⁵⁵ These second generation Muslims, unlike their fathers who had been converted, were born and brought up as Muslims in the town's Muslim social network and therefore, in many ways they were considered to be different. Illustrative of a form of cumulative

⁵⁴ H. Fisher, 1985:158-159.

⁵⁵ See the case of the two sisters described in chapter 2 (pp. 88-89) Karimi and Kainda whose separate identities kept them apart - one in Majengo and the other in Swahili village, as determined by their marriage to a Swahili and a *mahaji* respectively. This shift of emphasis and its role in the consolidation of a common Muslim identity in the town is discussed.

Muslim impact is the pattern of their names - while their fathers acquired Arabic names in addition to their Kimeru names which they retained, the latter acquired two or more Arabic names, without retaining Kimeru names. This can be seen as conscious effort on their part to obliterate traces of their *mahaji* descent. They could now claim Swahili status, like their cousins living in the Swahili village. Kiswahili was their first language and the majority of them married within the Muslim community. Accordingly, their faith was considered to be purer than that of their fathers who were accused by the 'exemplars' of the faith (that is the Nubians and the heterogenous group that identified itself as the Swahili in Meru) of retaining many Meru traditions and mixing them with Islam.

The youth in the third generation of Muslims, as the analysis of mosque attendance revealed, tend to show a greater laxity in religious observance than the older generation. They are complacent about their Muslim inheritance - they feel that their 'Muslimness' cannot be lost since it is not acquired through conversion. But the older members of the community who are obviously aware of an increasing laxity on the part of the younger people, attribute it to the contemporary social-economic pressures with which the youth have to cope. The significance of this trend for our purpose is that the cumulative Muslim impact is leading the community in a different direction than that predicted by Fisher, and in spite of *Tabligh* influence, concern for the pervasive indifference and laxity was expressed in the *mwiko*-handing over ceremony that has already been discussed in chapter 5.

In the 1960s, a single standard of piety was held to apply not only to the Muslims in the town but effectively to all Muslims in Meru; for instance, failure to observe such ceremonies as 'circumbulation of the settlement', *Kuzungua mji*, was considered portentous to its residents. Now there ceases to be any *a priori* reason why such a practice, which was

anchored in Swahili Islamic tradition, should be deemed necessary for Majengo or Mjini.

Outside the Majengo and Mjini Muslim enclaves, the progression is towards de-Swahilization of the faith. What I mean by 'de-Swahilization' is that emphasis is shifting from the importance of acquiring Swahili customs at conversion. This has been illustrated by the case of Asumani's first wife Amina and that of Hisham's wife, Asha, discussed in chapter 6. Also it may be that this process of acculturation is no longer necessary, and perhaps much less practical nowadays.

It can also be argued that this self de-construction or discarding much of the Swahili cultural external trappings on conversion to Islam (though, as it has been shown throughout this study, certain 'fossilized' coastal Swahili concepts have continually tempered the local perceptions of Islam and are still extant) is part of a self-reconstruction of Islam in a changing social environment. Geertz observes that religious belief and practice are "inescapably dependent upon the utilization by individuals of socially available 'systems of significance'".⁵⁶ These systems of significance change with time, for instance at the planting of Islam and Christianity in Meru, the missionaries propagated the notion of the superiority of western culture over that of the Meru. Hence those who adopted the new religions were supposed to be 'enlightened' while their kinsmen were seen as 'backward'. Now the value system has changed so that enlightenment is no longer gauged by the use of chinaware,⁵⁷ for instance. Similarly, as part of this self de-construction and reconstruction of Swahili Islam, many of the

⁵⁶ C. Geertz, 1968:18.

⁵⁷ It has been shown in chapter 2 (p. 92) that the use of Chinaware by the Muslims in Meru was a sign of civilization, and indeed that was the basis for the practice of serving food on banana leaves for non-Muslims when they visited their relatives in the town. J. de V. Allen (1975:122) has also mentioned that use of chinaware was a sign of a cultured Swahili.

features introduced by the Muslim pioneers have gradually disappeared, for instance, the method of conversion up till the mid 1950s⁵⁸ is no longer practiced. Conversion to Islam does not free an individual from the traditional social obligations any more.

The Muslim influence that has been prevalent in Meru since the mid-1970s is not aimed at changing the way of life of the individual converts. Conversion of such individuals as Nchulubi⁵⁹ does not reflect a progression of faith - a reorientation and crossing of religious frontiers as Nock suggests. Illustrative of this continuity was the difficulty experienced by my informants (Muslim converts) when trying to define their beliefs prior to conversion. As I have said before, when asked to say what their beliefs were before they converted to Islam or Christianity, my informants were unable to do so. A factor contributing to this ambiguity is that among the Meru (and many other African peoples) religion is not divorced from everyday life. As Horton says, the traditional societies in the search for a causal explanation of the incomprehensible, the misfortunes, in other words to penetrate behind the facade of the observable in their everyday life, developed a theoretical representation through spirits, ancestors and deities.

In the traditional scheme of things, problems were solved as they came through a wide range of practices by the experts; for instance if the rain failed, the people consulted their diviner/oracle to diagnose the cause of the rain failure and the same or another expert would suggest the necessary course of action. A case in point is the Njia curse discussed in chapter 2. The explanation for the prevalence of a thorny weed which could make the land barren and unproductive was found in the curse laid on Njia

⁵⁸ The process of choosing a name for a new convert and the cleansing ritual of symbolic bath is described in chapter 2, pp. 106-107.

⁵⁹ See the case of witchcraft discussed in chapter 6, pp. 282-289.

people by the Rendille.⁶⁰ Sickness was also treated by experts after the diagnosis was made and the necessary measures were taken. For instance if a certain taboo had been broken and the culprit or their relative(s) were suffering as a result, the prescribed cleansing ritual would be performed to restore their ritual purity and treatment would be administered either before, after or at the same time as required. In the traditional understanding, these solutions to everyday problems were not perceived as 'religious' activities. Such solutions and remedies did not constitute a systematic set of beliefs and this explains the absence of the word for 'religion' in many African languages.⁶¹

As I have just said above, the gradual process of the spread of Islam set off by the *Tabligh* in the beginning of the 1980s, is not a reorientation of the ideas emanating from this traditional scheme of things. Simmons' observation is in his study of conversion in Tonghia, a Senegalese village, West Africa, is useful for our analysis of the *Tabligh*-borne conversion. Simmons posited the occurrence of conversion as both continuous and discontinuous, at both the symbolic and the non-symbolic levels.⁶² The symbolic level entails change in the converts "mode of attachment to sacred symbols".⁶³ This means that converts experience a change in their notions of the sacred values and symbols. In this event, conversion is discontinuous as old symbols are discarded and new ones introduced in their stead. At the

⁶⁰ The colonial District Commissioner did not see the sense in the story about a Rendille trade party who had laid a curse on Njia people because they had been attacked and lost their donkeys and goods. But the seriousness with which the people of Njia treated the matter, convinced him of the gravity of the situation, forcing him to make arrangements for the said curse to be lifted. See chapter 2, pp. 113-114.

⁶¹ L. Brenner (1989:87) acknowledges the problem of analyzing "'religion' in a society in which the concept of 'religion' is absent".

⁶² W. S. Simmons 1979:303.

⁶³ Ibid., p.303.

other level, it is continuous if the converts see their conversion as leading to yet new methods and rituals and new symbols of communicating with the same deity as before conversion. Simmons found that in the Senegalese village of Tonghia, conversion was both continuous and discontinuous. Similarly, in Meru (though as I have shown in chapter 6 the factors for conversion were different from those in Tonghia), conversion can be said to be both continuous and discontinuous. The discrepant levels of Islamization between the pioneers in Majengo and Mjini within the municipality, and the *Inshallah* can be understood in terms of the difference between these two levels of conversion. For the pioneer *mahaji* who formed a Muslim community in Majengo, conversion was in a sense continuous, only in a sense because a complete detachment from their traditional culture was not possible. It was meritorious to emulate the Swahili culture, therefore, conversion was continuous only in so far as they could go in their emulation of Swahili culture and thus change in the mode of attachment to certain sacred symbols. To this extent only, Islam can be said to have been continuous.

In contrast, the situation of the *Inshallah* conforms to the discontinuous level - for instance, Nchulubi's case, (if I can refer to it once more) shows no signs of discontinuity. In her perception of the propriety of religious duties and obligations, observing the distinction between *halal* and *haram* meat is sufficient. Also she goes to the mosque on Fridays, though this is not possible every Friday because she has to make a long and tortuous journey to the Marikaz. A distance of 10 kilometres has to be covered on foot! From an outsider's point of view, her religious experience, and that of many others like her, is limited to the occasional Friday mosque trip; an occasional visit to the area by a prominent religious leader; and the annual religious festivals, which bring together all the local faithful at the Markaz.

In his study of the expression of Islamic identities among the Dyula in Koko, northern Cote d'Ivoire, Robert Launay suggests that ethnic differences, class differences, and many other differences among people are relevant to different conceptions of Islam wherever such differences are socially salient. These different conceptions of Islam define and express the nature of communities and the roles and places of the individuals who form those communities. Within these communities therefore "hierarchies of one sort or another are legitimated or contested".⁶⁴ Seen in the light of Launay's analysis, the differences between the Muslim communities in Meru during the first phase, the process of constructing a common Muslim identity during the second phase, and the dilemma of sustaining the Muslim identity facing the *Inshallah* Muslims in the rural area during the third phase were relevant in the local conception of Islam as a struggle between *dini* and *ushenzi*. *Dini* defined and helped to sustain the social boundaries between the various groups in Meru. *Dini* legitimated the superiority of "birth in the faith" over conversion on the one hand, and the superiority of Muslims in general over *washenzi* on the other.

On the one hand, the Muslims in Meru are aware of themselves as members of a local community and of the wider ummah, an awareness which they express in the phrase "*Islam ni moja*", Islam is one. On the other, they espouse the expression of separate identities within Islam. Launay explains this duality thus:

the local community... is a highly personal realm, governed by regular face-to-face interaction. Within such communities, the differences between members, rather than their equality before God, are of paramount importance. Those distinctions that, if recognized, are at least relativized at the global level - male and female, adult and child, slave and free - are of primary importance within the local community. To these, each local community may add a host of distinctions... In a fundamental sense, the global community

⁶⁴ R. Launay, 1992:30-32.

postulates the essential equality of all humans, the local community their essential difference.⁶⁵

He goes on to explain that ritual provides the medium for expressing and sustaining these differences. An important point to note is that different communities have different types of distinctions and apply similar forms of distinctions in different ways, for instance the distinction between the 'Swahiliness' and the '*mahajiness*' in Meru, cannot qualify either as ethnic or as class distinction, yet it was fundamental to the expression of the identities of the two groups of Muslims.

Although this study builds on the ideas outlined to explain the presence and representation of Islam in Meru, it departs from these explanations by focusing on the importance of such local factors as the process of the formation of the nucleus Muslim communities in Meru, the process of transmuting certain 'fossilized' elements of Swahili coastal concepts of civility; and the response of the Meru people, deriving from such structural factors as the clan, *Njuri* and curse, and particularly the incentives that these create for conversion. What the Meru case shows is the critical importance of such local variables that have nothing to do with the choice of 'compatible' Muslim elements by the converts.

Fisher's explanation notes quite correctly Africa's ability to make even rigorous Islam its own, but while he acknowledges selectivity in the process of adopting Islam, he offers few explanations of how this has been done in a variety of ways and places, (such as those of East and West Africa) from essentially the same 'core' Islam. Yet even within the same region, there are regional cultural and historical variations that defy sweeping generalizations. Accounting for each case therefore requires an

⁶⁵ R. Launay, 1992:107.

excursion into the ways in which Islam shapes group formation and facilitates expression of separate identities.

The various manifestations of Islam therefore are shaped by local factors: cultures and historical processes. These various manifestations of Islam are akin to Launay's "multiple Islams",⁶⁶ which in their multifarious dimensions are part of the one universal Islam, summed up in the immutable creed that 'There is no god but Allah and Muhamad is His Messenger'.

⁶⁶ R. Launay, 1992:5.

GLOSSARY

Ahl al-Sunnah - Those who adhere to the Sunnah, that is the sayings and deeds of the prophet as expressed in the Hadith.

Alim (plur. *ulama*) - Scholar, one who possesses knowledge.

Amiri - Commander, leader. *Tabligh* leaders are also known as *Amiri*.

Arubaini - Forty. It is the term used for the remembrance feast forty days after a person's death. *Arubaini* is also the term used for the period of forty days after a woman has given birth, during which period she is considered to be unclean and she does not perform her customary household chores until she goes through the prescribed rituals of purification. This custom is also found among the Meru where the mother of a new baby is kept in seclusion for a month before she could resume her normal life.

Askari - Soldier, police or any paramilitary person.

Ayaana - *Ayaana* is the name of a cult. In everyday language among the Borana, *ayaana* is used in relation to the traditional lunar calendar which has 27 days.

Baraka - Blessing, God's blessing, favour or prosperity.

Baraza - Place of public audience or reception, members of a council, cabinet or a committee of elders. In the thesis it is used to refer to the informal gatherings where the elders usually sit to discuss the current affairs and issues affecting the Meru Muslim community.

Bid'a - Religious innovation.

Boma - Any kind of raised structure for defensive or protective purpose. It also means homestead and cowshed or kraal. The term was used throughout Kenya for the colonial government administrative centres, many of which gradually developed into towns.

Bui - A black garment covering from head to toe, worn by Muslim women outdoors.

Dewe - A derogatory term used by the Swahili Muslims for the Meru pioneer Muslim converts whose ears had been pierced and earlobes prolonged in the Meru traditional way.

Dhikr - To mention the name of God. It may be performed as a group ritual which occasionally induces a state of trance. Dhikr is a significant aspect of sufism.

Dini - Religion, worship or creed. In the thesis *dini* means Islam, the Swahili-Islamic cultural values and external trappings.

Falak - Astrology, cast a horoscope, take the omens by observing the stars. In the thesis the term is used with reference to the some of the readings used in the treatment of the sick.

Haji - Pilgrimage to Mecca. It is also a title for a Muslim male who has made a pilgrimage to Mecca. A female pilgrim is Hajah, but seldom used as a title.

Halal - Permissible, lawful, allowed, rightful.

Haram - Forbidden, unlawful, prohibited by Muslim law or custom.

Harambee - The term means to pull together (usually to lift up something). It became not only a rallying call for the newly-independent Kenyan state late in the 1960s, but also a powerful political philosophy through which many development projects were and still are implemented throughout the country.

Hirizi - Charm, amulet to wear on the person. Often a small leather case containing a verse from the Quran, though it is only the medicineman who knows the contents of the amulet.

Hishima - Honour, dignity, position or rank, reverence, modesty or curtesy.

Ibadah - Worship.

Ichiaro - This Kimeru term could be rendered as ritual alliance that exists between certain sub-sections and clans. It defines and regulates relationships, for instance it determines which clans are endogamous and which are not.

Id-ul-fitr - The feast at the end of the *Ramadhan* fast observed by Muslims all over the world.

Id-ul-Haji - It is celebrated in commemoration of Prophet Mohammad's journey to Mecca.

Ijtmai - It means meeting. However, *Tabligh ijtmai* discussed in the thesis were not ordinary meetings, they could be described as conventions or symposia.

Ikanda - It was a kind of charm placed by the entrance to the homestead to deter any person who passed through the entrance with intent to harm those living in the particular homestead. It was believed to work in the same way as an amulet worn on the wrist, waist or any other part of the body.

Jamaa - Family, society, assembly, gathering or meeting.

Jamatkhana - Shia Imami Ismailia mosque.

Kalimah - The profession of faith, the first pillar of Islam.

Kanzu - It is an outer garment for men, a long sleeved calico gown, reaching from the neck to the ankles, usually plain white or beige, with or without decorative stitchwork on the neck, wrist, and front. It is fastened with a small button at the neck, and worn over the trousers.

Khutba - Friday sermon, speech.

Kiama - The traditional council of elders, usually the executive council of elders among the Meru.

Kiaro - It was the term used for the forced labour (and also portage) that was introduced by the early colonial administrators in Meru. It was the young warriors who went on *kiaro*.

Kilemba - Turban

Kufuru - To treat with mockery or contempt, to blaspheme or commit sacrilege, to become an unbeliever.

Kusilimishwa - To be converted to Islam.

Kuzidua - To extract or draw out, but its use with regard to people, it means to draw them or awaken them to their religious obligations.

Leso - Multicolored cotton cloth worn by Swahili (Muslim) women. One piece is wrapped around the waist and the other over the head and shoulders.

Lugha - Language

Madebe - (sing.*debe*) Tins

Madrassa - Quranic school

Mahaji - Term used by the Swahili for pioneer Meru Muslim converts.

Matanga moja - A ritual of observing mourning period together in groups related through marriage in the traditional Lamu society.

Matanga - Formal mourning, lasting three or four to ten days, during which period friends and relatives sleep in the mourner's house.

Mau Mau - It was the liberation movement which rallied the Kenyan people together to fight for their freedom from the British colonial government. It started in 1952 and ended in 1960.

Maula - A place in the homestead set apart for prayer.

Maulid - The annual celebrations of Prophet Mohammad's birthday.

Miraa - A kind of plant grown in Meru as a cash crop sold largely in Nairobi, Mombasa and North-Eastern Province. The young shoots are chewed as a habit.

Mtaa - A part of a town, a row of houses in a Majengo.

Muiro - A condition of ritual impurity resulting from a breach of an avoidance taboo in the traditional Meru society.

Mungu - The Swahili term for God.

Murungu - Kimeru term for God.

Mwiko - A large wooden instrument resembling a spoon, used for preparing food.

Mwiria(ga) - Clan

Nafsi - The self.

Nairuzi - A festival observed on the first day of the new year. It has its origin in Persia but it was observed by Swahili Muslims along the coast and later imported into the interior.

Ngai - Kimeru term for rain. It also means God.

Ngai-e-Kirimara - The God of Mount Kenya to whom the Meru people made sacrifices during national calamities, for instance.

Ngai-e-Njaambene - The God of Njaambene whom a section or the entire people of Meru invoked during times of need, for instance when the rain failed. Njaambene as a sacred place was particularly significant for the Igembe section of the Meru people.

Ngoma - Drum, song and dance, music in general. Ceremonial ngoma is extended to include any kind of dance and the usual accompaniment in merrymaking.

Njaamba - Kimeru term for male.

Njuri - The council that constituted the Meru traditional government. It comprised of various councils (*Njuri impingiri*), *Njuri ncheke*, *Njuri imbere*) whose membership was through the achievement of rank and high social status.

Njuri-e-Kauku - This was the derogatory term given to the Christians whom the colonial government, in an attempt to neutralize the powers of this traditional institution, insisted should be allowed to participate in Njuri activities on condition that they were sworn on the Bible rather than the traditional process of initiation into the Njuri ranks.

Nthenge - Kimeru term for he-goat.

Nyika - Open, bare forest or bush. It was used by the coastal people to refer to the peoples living inland, who were regarded as uncivilized. So the term also connotes backwardness, *ushenzi*, as opposed to the coastal Swahili-Islamic civilization, *ungwana*.

Pepo ya jinn - Jinn spirit.

Posho - Rations, daily supply of food, clothing or maintenance given to porters, soldiers or labourers.

Rubadiri - Incense.

Sadak - Religious offering, sacrifice, act of charity done for a religious motive.

Shemeji - Relation by marriage, brother-in-law, but also frequently used loosely of any particular friend of the husband.

Shifita - An Amharic word meaning bandit.

Shirk - Associating God with others. It is the deadliest sin a Muslim can commit.

Sijda - A callosity made on the forehead by prostration during prayer.

Siku ya mwaka - The first day of new year.

Somo - In the traditional coastal Swahili society, the term was used for a woman, usually an elderly woman, who attended a young girl during her first menstruation and instructed her in matters pertaining to marriage and adult life.

Swalihina - Those who observe regular prayer. Among Meru Muslims, the term is used for those who have the *sijda* on their foreheads.

Tabligh - In Arabic the term means to be informed, told, notified, communicated. *Tabligh* is an Islamic reform movement which originated in India sub-continent during this century and spread to many other parts of the world.

Tafsir - Exegesis, interpretation, explanation.

Tamko la Kiarabu - Arabic accent.

Tariqa - Way, path with reference to religious and particularly sufi order.

Tasbih - A kind of rosary used by Muslims when chanting praises to God.

Tohara - Cleanliness, ceremonial cleansing especially of circumcision as practiced by Muslims.

Ua moja - An enclosure, an open court or backyard attached to a house and fenced off.

Ungwana - Condition of high status or rank of a freeman contrasted formerly with that of a slave in the traditional coastal social stratification. In the thesis the term is used in the context of the coastal Islamic civilization as opposed to the non-Muslim peoples of the interior.

Ushenzi - Barbarity, uncouthness, savagery, formerly used contemptuously by the coastal people for those who come from the interior. While such terms are seldom used in the coastal region, in Meru they are

used in everyday conversation by Muslims with reference to non-Muslims.

Ustaarabu - Being like an Arab. Like *ungwana* it implies civilization as contrasted with *ushenzi*.

Vikundi vya Fisabi-Llahi - groups of those 'in the path of God'.

Vitumbua - A kind of home-made doughnut.

Wallahi - By God.

Wangaziya - People from Comoro Islands. They have a long Islamic tradition due to their long association with the East Africa coast.

Mshenzi (sing. *Mshenzi*) - Non-Muslim, 'uncivilized', bush people.

Washenzi wasio na dini - Barbaric people without religion, non-Muslims.

Watu wa mashambani - Rural people, people from the countryside as opposed to town residents.

Watu wa murid - Adherents of *Murid*.

Watumwe - Slaves.

Wazee wa mji - the elders of the village or settlement.

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